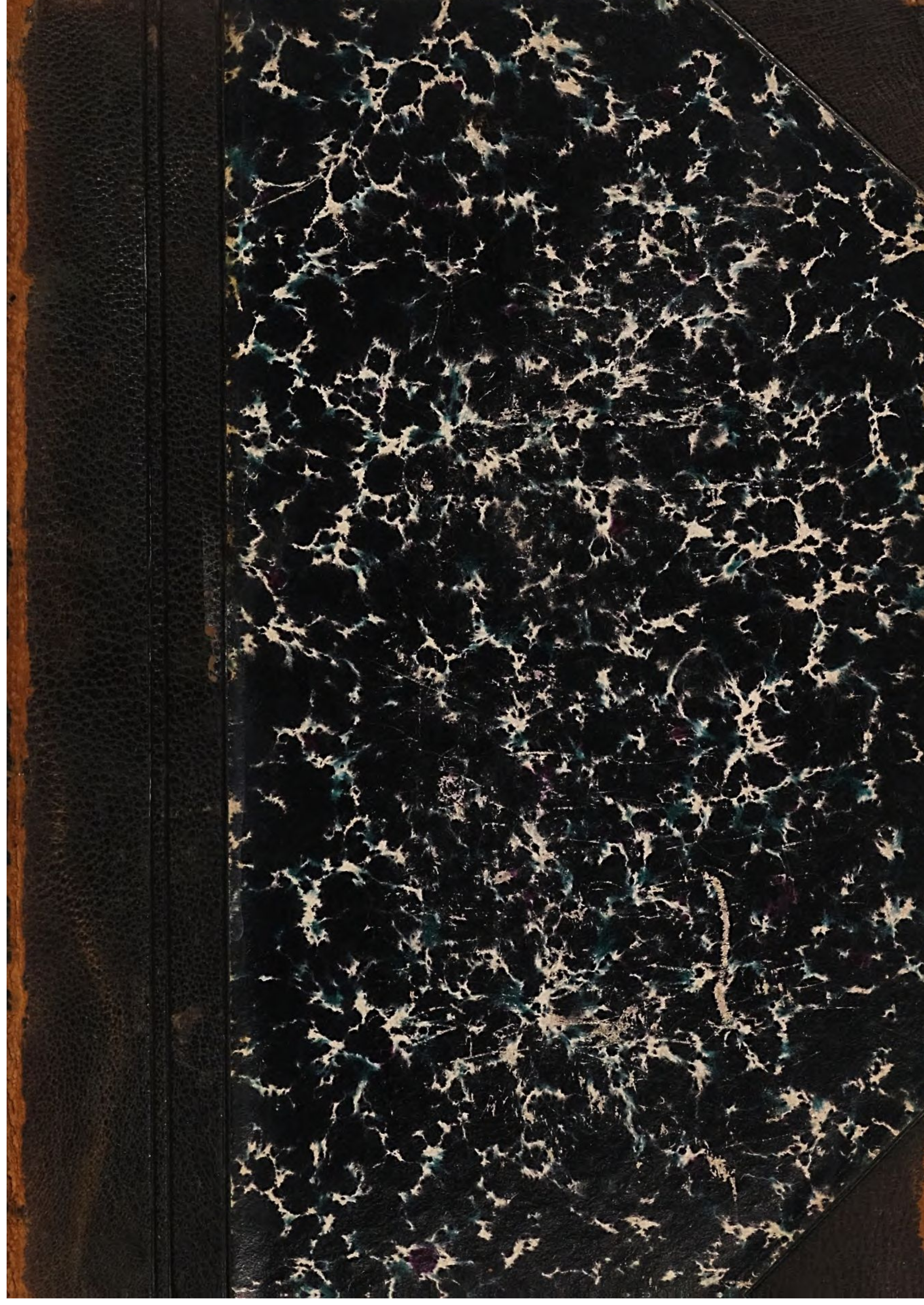




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VOL. 3265.

THE CHEVALIER D'AURIAC.

BY

S. LEVETT-YEATS.

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BY

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AUTHOR OF "THE HONOUR OF SAVELLI."

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LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1898.



TO THE
CHUMMERY OF THE PALMS

I DEDICATE THIS, IN MEMORY OF CERTAIN
RED-HOT DAYS.

S. L. Y.

PREFACE.

THIS story, like its predecessor, has been written in those rare moments of leisure that an Indian official can afford. Bits of time were snatched here and there, and much, perhaps too much, reliance has had to be placed on memory, for books there were few or none to refer to. Occasionally, too, inspiration was somewhat rudely interrupted. Notably in one instance, in the Traveller's Bungalow at Hassan Abdal (Moore's Lalla Rookh was buried hard by), when a bat, after making an ineffectual swoop at a cockroach, fell into the very hungry author's soup and put an end to dinner and to fancy. There is an anachronism in the tale, in which the writer finds he has sinned with M. C. de Remusat in "Le Saint-Barthélemy." The only excuse the writer has for not making the correction is that his object is simply to enable a reader to pass away a dull hour.

UMBALLA CANTONMENTS.

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PRELUDE.

I.

In no secret shrine doth my Lady sleep,
But is ever before mine eyes;
By well or ill, by wrong or right—
By the burning sun, or the moon's pale light—
Where the tropics fire or the fulmar flies,
In rest or stormful fight.

II.

Good hap with the strong fierce winds that blow;
Man holdeth the world in fee.
By the light of her face, by my Lady's grace,
Spread we our sails to the sea.
With God above and our hearts below,
Fight we the fight for weal or woe.

III.

Good hap with the strong fierce winds that blow,
God rest their souls who die!
By my Lady's grace, by her pure, pale face
My pennon flies in its pride of place;
Where my pennon flies am I.

IV.

Nor wind nor storm may turn me back,
For I see the beacon fire.
And time shall yield a hard-fought field,
And, with God's help, an unstained shield
I win my heart's desire.

S. L. Y.

(*Vanity Fair.*)

THE CHEVALIER D'AURIAC.

CHAPTER I.

THE JUSTICE OF M. DE RÔNE.

“*MILLE DIABLES!* Lost again! The devil runs in those dice!” and de Gomeron, with an impatient sweep of his hand, scattered the little spotted cubes on to the floor of the deserted and half-ruined hut, wherein we were beguiling the weariness of our picket duty before La Fère, with a shake of our elbows, and a few flagons of wine, captured from Monsieur the King of Navarre, as we, in our folly, called him still.

A few days before we had cut out a convoy which the Béarnais was sending into the beleaguered town. Some of the good things the convoy bore found their way to the outposts; and on the night I speak of we had made such play with our goblets that it was as if a swarm of bees buzzed in my head. As for de Gomeron, he was in no better case, and his sun-tanned face was burning a purple red with anger at his losses and the strength of the d'Arbois, both of which combined to give a more than usually sinister look to his grim and lowering features. In short, we were each of us in a condition ripe for any

mischief! I hot with wine and the fire of five-and-twenty years, and de Gomeron sullenly drunk, a restrained fury smouldering in his eyes.

We had been playing by the light of a horn lantern, and as the flame of it flickered to and fro in the wind, which bustled in unchecked through a wide gap in the wall of the hut, where the remains of a door clung to a bent and twisted hinge, the shadow of de Gomeron on the wall behind him moved its huge outlines uneasily, although the man himself sat silent and still, and there was no word spoken between us. Hideous and distorted, this phantom on the wall may have been the soul of de Gomeron, stolen out of the man's body and now hovering behind him, instinct with evil; and this conceit of mine began to appear a reality, when I turned my glance at the still figure of my companion, showing no sign of life, except in the sombre glitter of the eyes that gazed at me steadily.

I knew little of de Gomeron, except that he was of the Camargue, and had followed the fortunes of d'Aumale from Arques to Ivry, from Ivry to the Exile in the Low Countries, and that he held a commission from the duke as captain in his guards. He carried a 'de' before his name, but none of us could say where his lands lay, or of what family he came; and it was shrewdly suspected that he was one of those weeds tossed up by the storms of the times from the deep where they should have rotted for ever. There were many such as he, *canaille* who had risen from the ranks; but none who bore de Gomeron's reputation for intrepid courage and pitiless cruelty, and even the hardened veterans of Velasco spoke with lower tones when they told of his deeds at the sack of Dourlens and the pillage of Ham. Of our personal relations it is

enough to say that we hated each other, and would have crossed swords ere now but for the iron discipline maintained by de Rône—a discipline the bouquet of which I had already scented, having escaped by the skin of my teeth after my affair with de Gonnor, who trod on my toe at the General's *levée*, and was run through the ribs at sunrise the next morning, near the pollard elms, hard by the Red Mill on the left bank of the Serre.

Up to the time this occurred I had been attached to de Rône's staff, with ten or twelve other young gentlemen whose pedigrees were as long as their swords; but after the accident to de Gonnor—my foot slipped and I thrust a half inch too low—I was sent with the stormers to Laon, and then banished to the outposts, thinking myself lucky to escape with that.

At anyrate, the outpost was under my command. Imagine, therefore, my disgust when I found that de Gomeron had been detached to examine into and report upon my charge. He did this moreover in so offensive a manner, hectoring here and hectoring there, that I could barely restrain myself from parading him on the stretch of turf behind the thorn hedge that fenced in the enclosure to the hovel. The very sight of that turf used to tempt me. It was so soft and springy, so level and true, with no cross shadows of tree trunks or mottled reflections of foliage to spoil a thrust in tierce.

Our feelings towards each other being as they were, it would seem odd that we should have dined and drunk together; but the situation was one of armed peace; and, besides, time had to be killed, as for the past week M. de Réthelois, formerly as lively as a cricket, had kept himself close as a nun of Port Royal behind the walls of La Fère, and affairs were ineffably dull. I was certain,

however, that we should soon break into open quarrel, and on this night, whether it was de Gomeron's manner of losing or whether it was the d'Arbois I cannot tell, but I felt a mad anger against the man as he sat staring at me, and it was all I could do to restrain myself from flinging the lees of the wine in my glass in his face and abiding the result. I held myself in with an effort, drumming with my fingers on the table the while, and at last he spoke in an abrupt and jarring voice:

"What says the score?"

I looked at the once blank card on which I had jotted down the points and passed it to him with the answer: "One hundred and twenty livres of Paris, M. Gomeron."

"*De* Gomeron, if you please, M. d'Auriac. Here is your money, see it is not Tournois," and he slid a rouleau across the table towards me. I made no effort to take it; but, looking at the man with a sneer, gave answer; "I was not aware that they used the *de* in the Camargue, monsieur."

"Young fool!" I heard him mutter between his teeth, and then aloud, "Your education needs extension, Chevalier."

"There is space enough without," I answered hotly, laying my hand on my sword, "and no time like the present; the moon is at her full and stands perfectly." We sprang to our feet at these words and stood facing each other. All thought of de Rône had flown from my mind, my one desire was to be face to face with the man on that patch of turf. *Peste!* I had much to learn in those days!

We stood thus for a second, and then a short mirthless "Ha! ha!" burst from de Gomeron, and he made a

turn to the corner of the room where his rapier leaned against the wall. It was at the moment of this action that we heard the quick challenge of the sentry outside, the pass-word as sharply answered, and the tramp of feet.

The same idea flashed through both our minds—it must be the General, and de Gomeron gave expression to the thought.

“*Corbleu!* de Rône perhaps—the old bat on the wing. We must defer the lesson, Chevalier.”

I bowed and bit my lips in silence; there followed a shuffling of feet, and before a man could count two, Nicholas, the sergeant of our picket, with a file of men entered the hut, thrusting a couple of prisoners, a man and a woman, before them.

“Two birds from La Fère, my captain,” and Nicholas with a salute to de Gomeron pointed to his prize. “We took them,” he ran on, “at the ford near the Red Mill, and but for the moon they would have gone free; spies no doubt. The old one is M. le Mouchard, I swear. There is fox in every line of his face; and as for Madame there—so the old gentleman calls her—in time I warrant she will learn to love the camp of the Holy League,” and the sergeant pushed the lantern so that it shone full on the lady’s face. A curious light came into de Gomeron’s eyes as he looked at her, and she shrank back at the sergeant’s words and action, whilst the old man strained at the cords that bound his wrists till the lines of the blue veins stood high out on his forehead. The soldiers had shown Madame this kindness, that she was unbound; but her hood had fallen back, loosening in its fall a mass of chestnut hair, and from this framework her eyes glanced from one to another of us, half in fear and half in anger.

"Messieurs!" There was a tremble in the sweet voice, and there was light enough to see her colour come and go. "Messieurs! That man," she made a little gesture of infinite disdain towards Nicholas, "is lying. We are no spies. It is true we are from La Fère, but all that we did was to try and escape thence——"

"To the camp of the Béarnais—eh, madame?" interrupted de Gomeron.

"To the camp of the King of France," she flashed back at him, a red spot rising on each cheek. "Messieurs!" she went on, "you are gentlemen, are you not? You will let us go. Surely the Holy League wars not with women and old men?"

The mention of the League stirred her companion and he gave tongue:

"The Holy League!" he exclaimed with a savage scorn. "Madame, though we stand delivered unto these sons of Belial, I must speak, for my heart is full. Yea! Shall my lips be sealed before the enemies of the Lord! The Holy League! Ha! ha! There is no Holy League. It died at Ivry. There did the Lord God break it clean, as of old He shattered the Amorites of the mountains. Lo! Even now His own champion is at hand, and ere the morrow's sun sets he shall smite these men of sin hip and thigh, as when the Chosen slew His enemies in Gibeon."

"*Corps du diable!* A rope for the old Huguenot!" exclaimed Nicholas.

"Thou swearest rightly, villain," and the fanatic glared at the sergeant with fierce eyes. "Swear ever so by thy master, for thou art in truth a limb of the body of Sin."

"Thou shalt roast like a chestnut over a log fire for this," roared Nicholas, shaking his halberd at his ad-

versary. "And thou in Hell," was the undaunted reply; "and the smell of thy burning will be as the scent of a savoury bakemeat to the Lord my God."

So savagely prophetic was his tone; so fierce a glance did the bound Huguenot cast at Nicholas that it burnt to cinders any reply he might have had ready and reduced him to a speechless fury.

Madame shivered slightly; but meeting my eyes and the repressed laugh in them, a faint smile parted her lips. This was for an instant only, and her face was grave enough as she turned to her companion, speaking with a quiet dignity, "There is a time for everything, *mon père*—at present your speech is a trifle out of place."

The beetle brows of the Huguenot met together as he gave reply—

"There is no place which is out of place to testify——" but here de Gomeron cut in with his quick stern voice, "Be silent, sir! or else a gag will stop your tongue," and then with a bow, "Madame, it goes to my heart to detain you; but war is war, and we have no option. Will you not be seated? All that this poor hut affords is yours," and he bent low again, perhaps to hide the expression in his eyes.

She made no effort to take the chair he offered, but burst out passionately:

"Monsieur, I see you command here, and it is to you to whom I must appeal. Monsieur, I give you my word of honour we are no spies. The rules of war allow the ransom of prisoners, and anything you name will be paid. Monsieur, I pray you let us go."

Whilst she spoke my glance rested on de Gomeron's face, and I saw that his eyes were drinking in her beauty

greedily, and there was a look in them that recalled to my mind the stories of the sack of Ham.

As she finished her appeal Madame turned towards the captain with a gesture of entreaty; but in this movement she too saw that in his voice and manner which paled her cheek to marble, and she made a half-irresolute step towards her companion as if for protection. De Gomeron observed this, and laughed under his heavy black moustache, and I felt that the strong wine and his evil heart were moving him to an atrocious deed.

“*Vertu de Dieu!* Madame, but there are some things which have no price! And there is no ransom you could name which would tempt Adam de Gomeron to part with his prisoners—with *one* of them at anyrate. *You* are no spy, I know: such eyes as yours were never made to count the strength of battalions. As for your friend there, we have means to make him tell us all about himself to-morrow; and you, *ma mignonne*, must not bruise your tender feet by walking through the night to the camp of Monsieur—the King of France. In a day or so, perhaps,” he went on with a horrible smile, “but not to-night. Come! and he stepped up to her. Come, taste the d’Arbois—it is from your friends—and learn to love the poor soldiers of the Holy League.”

Saying this he attempted to pass his arm round her waist, but slipping from his grasp, and her cheeks aflame, Madame struck him across the face with the back of her hand, such a stroke as the wing of an angry dove might give.

The rest was done in a flash, and de Gomeron reeled back with bleeding lips, staggered back to the very end of the room, where he would have fallen but for the support of the wall. It was in me to follow up my blow by

passing my sword through the man, so mad was I in my fury; but luckily for him Nicholas hung on my arm and saved the villain's life. He righted himself at once, and passing his hand across his mouth, spoke to me quite coolly and collectedly, but with livid features.

"We finish this outside, sir; follow me," and picking up his rapier, which lay on the table, where he had thrown it on the entrance of the prisoners, de Gomeron stepped out of the door. In the excitement of the moment the men poured after him, and I was the last to follow. It came to me like lightning that the prisoners were unguarded, and slipping my dagger from its sheath, I thrust its haft into Madame's hand, and I saw that she understood from the thanks in her eyes. As I went out I heard the voice of the Huguenot: "They shall die as they have lived—by the edge of the sword; and the Lord shall confound His enemies."

It was but a stone-throw to the stretch of green, which extended as level as a tennis-court for a hundred paces or so, and then sloped gently downward towards the junction of the Serre and the Oise. Beyond rose the walls of La Fère, whose grey outlines, lit up here and there by the flare of a lamp or fire, were clearly visible in the bright moonlight. So clear was this light, that I could distinctly make out the blue flowers of the patch of borage, which lay between the hut and the thorn hedge, beyond which de Gomeron was awaiting me. When I came up I found him standing with his back to the moon. He had thrown off his doublet, and was in his shirt sleeves, which were rolled up to his elbows, and Nicholas and the men stood a little on one side, utterly forgetful of the prisoners, and eager as bloodhounds to witness the coming fight. It took but a half minute to make myself ready, and borrowing

a poniard from Nicholas to help me to parry, for de Gomeron held one in his left hand, and I was determined to give him no further advantage—he already had the light—I took my position. Then there was an angry little clash and our blades met, looking for all the world like two thin streaks of fire in the moonlight. I began the attack at once in the lower lines, but soon found that my adversary was a master of his weapon, and his defence was complete. We were both sober enough now, besides being in deadly earnest, and de Gomeron began to change his tactics and attack in his turn. He was more than cunning of fence, thrusting high at my throat to get as much of the reflection of the moon as possible on his blade, and so dazzle my eyes; but this was a game I had played before, and seeing this he disengaged, and making a beautiful feint, thrust low in tierce. The parry was just in time, but the point of his blade ripped me exactly over the heart, and dyed my shirt red with the blood of a flesh wound. The discipline of Nicholas and his men went to shreds at the sight of this, and there was a shout: “*Croix Dieu!* He is lost!”

But a man's knowledge is not to be counted by his years, and Maître Touchet had himself placed a foil in my hand ere I was seven. The hair that stood between me and death as de Gomeron's point touched me cooled me to ice, and knowing that in a long-continued contest youth must tell, I began to feign retreat, and give back slowly, meaning to wind my opponent, and work him round to get a little of the moon in his eyes. De Gomeron took the bait and pressed his attack, with the result that he shifted his position of vantage, and in a while began to breathe heavily. At this point a cloud obscured the moonlight, and my opponent, springing back,

called out: "Hold! hold till the cloud passes! We cannot see."

"But I can, messieurs," answered a deep voice to our right. "What means this fool's work?" and a tall figure, the white line of a drawn sword shining in its hand, stepped between us, coming, as it were, from nowhere. The cloud passed, and the moon was again brilliant and clear. The light fell on the commanding form before us, showing the high aquiline features and grizzled hair of de Rône himself. Nicholas and his men melted into thin air at the sight, and de Gomeron and I stood speechless. The wind caught the black plumes in the General's hat, waving them silently in the air, and brought to us the faint clink of a chain-bit—de Rône had evidently stolen upon us on foot, leaving his horse at a distance.

"So this is how my outposts are kept?" he said. "M. de Gomeron, you are the senior officer here, and I await your explanation. *Mordieu!* It is something that I do this."

"I command the guards of the Duc d'Aumale," began de Gomeron sullenly, but de Rône interrupted him in the same deep measured voice.

"I know that. Your explanation, or," and in fierce anger, "by God! you will hang like a common thief by sunrise."

"A gentleman must defend his honour. Orders or no orders, General, there are times when one must fight. There was a matter in connection with some prisoners, and I was struck by M. d'Auriac. I have nothing further to say."

"Now, M. d'Auriac, what have you to say?"

"The prisoners will, perhaps, explain to your Excellency why I struck this man."

"Take me to them."

We gathered up our belongings, and, hastily dressing, led the way back to the hut. What de Gomeron's thoughts were I know not, but my own reflections were none of the most cheerful. We all knew de Rône, and knew that, his mind once made up, nothing could turn him. De Gomeron had some chance of escape, as of a certainty I was the open aggressor; but for myself, I saw poor de Gonnor lying under the elm trees, taking his last look at the sunlight, and my heart became like lead. But we had no great time for thought, as a few steps brought us to the door of the hut, where Nicholas and his men stood at the salute with scared faces. Another step took us in, and de Rône, with a curling lip, cast a glance around the room, at the emptied wine flasks and the dice, which latter one of the men had doubtless picked up, and placed in a small heap beside the rouleau I had won. But chairs, table, wine flasks, and dice were all the room contained, and there was reason enough for the extra length of visage that master Nicholas and his knaves had pulled.

"I do not see the prisoners," said de Rône quietly.

It was not likely, I thought to myself. They were gone—not a doubt of that. On the floor, near my feet, were some cut cords, and, lying on them, a knot of black and white ribbon, that had fallen there as if by chance. I had seen it last at the shoulder of Madame's dress, and something told me it was not there by accident. There was, at anyrate, no hope for me from the prisoners, but a sudden impulse I could not understand, nor, indeed, did I try to, urged me to get the knot of ribbon, so, stooping low, I picked up the bow and the cut cords, and, with a careless movement, flung the latter on the

table, saying quietly, "They have escaped, your Excellency."

"And with them your explanation, M. d'Auriac, eh? *Corbleu!* But the camp-marshal will have his hands full to-morrow;" and Nicholas' halberd all but fell from his hands as the General's eye rested on him. I had nothing to say; and de Rône went on. "M. de Gomeron, you have given me a reason for your conduct that will hold good this once. Further orders will reach you at daylight about your neglect of your prisoners. As for you," and he turned on me with the sharp command, "Follow me. You—knaves! fetch me my horse—he is tethered to the clump of elms to the right there."

Two men vanished from the door to do his bidding, and I adjusted my attire as well as I might, taking the opportunity to secrete the knot of ribbon. In a minute or so we heard the sound of horses' hoofs, and as we went out, I saw there were two beasts at the door, and, from the whinny of welcome that came to me, that one was mine, and Nicholas was at his head.

As I sprang into the saddle the good fellow leaned forward and whispered, "Make a dash for it, Chevalier, and change the flag."

I shook my head and followed de Rône, who had already moved a few paces onwards. And yet, as I rode on, Nicholas' words came back to me with an insistent force. It was not possible for me to expect any other issue than the worst, after what had happened. My big Norman horse was fleet and strong; but a turn of my wrist, a touch of my spur, and we should be a hundred yards away before de Rône could realise what had happened; and then the road was clear to the banks of the Lelle, where the King was himself; yes, the King. He

was that to me, in my heart, although loyalty to my family and its chiefs had made me throw in my lot with the little band of exiles who remained true to the dead legend of the League, and preferred to eat the bread of Spain rather than accept the great Frenchman who had fought his way to his birthright. Even now, whispers were stirring the air that the end was coming; that the Archduke was sick of the war; that d'Aumale pined for his stately park of Anet; that Mayenne had practically submitted, and the Guisard was himself unsteady. If so, why should not I, Alban de Breuil, whose crow's-nest of Auriac was half in ruins, and who reckoned an income of a bare two hundred pistoles, see the error of my ways as well? Behind me was safety. In front, between the nodding ears of my horse, there dangled a vision of a rope with a noose at the end of it; and I a noble!

It was now midnight, and we distinctly heard the bells of Ste. Geneviève ringing the Sexts. They came to me with a refrain of "Turn and ride, Turn and ride." *Mor-dieu!* but I was sorely tempted.

"Gallop!"

De Rône's sharp command broke the thread of my thoughts, and ended all chance of escape. We set spurs to our horses and splashed through the ford of the Oise, a half mile from the outpost. On the other bank a picket challenged, and, giving them the word, we rode in the direction of the even white line of the camp. A few strides more and we reined in at the door of the General's tent. The guard presented arms and I received a brief order to dismount and followed de Rône.

I entered the tent, and stood patiently whilst he walked backwards and forwards for a little time. Suddenly he stopped and, facing me, said,

"Well, M. d'Auriac?"

"It could not be helped, your Excellency," I stammered.

"You said that of de Gonnor, and promised it should never occur again——"

"But there were circumstances——"

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed, "I guess them all—wine—dice—women. One of the prisoners was a woman. I saw you pick up that knot of ribbon. There is no excuse—*Croix Dieu!* None."

"I had the honour to be the first man behind your Excellency at the storm of Laon," I said, with a happy recollection.

"And saved my life, you were going to say," he cut in. I bowed, and de Rône began again to pace up and down, tugging at his short pointed beard. I was determined to seize the three hairs occasion offered, and continued:

"And that was after M. de Gonnor's unfortunate accident."

"Accident!" he laughed shortly. "And that accident having been condoned, you want to set off saving my life against breaking the orders of the General?"

"It will not occur again."

"*Croix Dieu!* I will take care of that. It will not occur again with you, M. d'Auriac. See here, I will pay my debt; but first ask if I have your parole not to attempt escape. If you do not give it——" and he laid his hand on a call-bell, with an inquiring look towards me.

"I will not attempt escape."

"Then you will not have to complain of the justice of de Rône. To-morrow some things will happen, and

amongst them will be the lamented death of the Sieur d'Auriac. This much I will tell you. To-morrow the King and I meet once more—you must die on the field. Win or lose, if I catch you alive at the close of the day, I will hang you as high as Haman; and now go.”

CHAPTER II.

M. DE RÔNE CANNOT READ A CYPHER.

My first thought on leaving de Rône was to make my way direct to the quarters of the staff, where I felt sure of welcome and accommodation for the rest of the night. These lay a hundred toises or so from the General's pavilion, facing from me; but as I came near to them I saw a pennon of light streaming from the partly open door of the largest tent, and from within burst a chorus of voices singing an old *chanson* of Guienne.

Frère Jacques, dormez-vous?

Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?

Sonnez les matines, sonnez les matines—

Bim! Baum! Baum!

Bim! Baum! Baum! The last line was repeated amidst peals of laughter, followed by the crashing of glass. It was enough for me. I was in no mood for any further folly, or any more d'Arbois, and resolved to make the best of it in the open, as at this hour it was worse than useless to attempt to find my lackey Jacques, whom I had left behind in the camp with my belongings when I went on to the outposts. This man, I may note, was a faithful servant of our house, rough of manner, perhaps, but one who could be trusted to the end of his sword; and it was annoying to know that any search for him would be useless, as I had a message or so to send to Auriac, in the event of the worst happening. But resigning myself to

what could not be helped I found a spot under some peach trees, which was convenient enough for my purpose. Tethering my horse to a stump, I removed the saddle, which I made shift to use as a cushion, and, leaning my back against it, was soon as comfortable as circumstances would permit. Enough had happened to drive from my head any of the fumes of the d'Arbois that may have been lurking there. In short, I was as sober as MM. of the High Court of Paris, and as wide awake as a cat on the look out for a mouse. Do what I could, sleep would not come, and I began, for want of a better thing, to reflect on my position. To act on Nicholas' advice and desert was out of the question; my private honour was not to be smirched, and the few hours I had yet to live were not to be spent in the breaking of my faith. A few hours to live! Involuntarily I stretched out my arm and drew it back, feeling the muscle rise at the movement. Good Lord! It was cruel! When one is five-and-twenty, and strong as a bull, it is hard to die. One death, that on the field, I could face with an equal mind; but if the chances of to-morrow were not kind, then there was the other matter, and the last of the d'Auriacs would swing like a *croquemort* from the branch of a tree. *Morbleu!* It was not to be borne, and I swore that my own hand should free my soul, rather than it should choke its way out to eternity at the end of a greased rope. The slight flesh wound I had received from de Gomeron beginning to sting at this moment, I thrust my hand into my pocket, and pulling out my kerchief, placed it over the spot. With the kerchief I drew out the knot of ribbon, and the sight of this, as I picked it up and held it between my fingers, changed the current of my thoughts. Almost in spite of myself I began to think of Madame, as I called her, by

the only name I knew. It was a strangely formal title for one so young! Who was she? Some great lady of the court, perhaps. The wife—the thought jarred on me, and I put it aside, and then grew cold all over at the recollection of the danger she had escaped. At anyrate, it was my hand that had rescued her from her peril. If we met again, it must surely be as friends, and it was pleasant to dwell on that. As my mind ran on in this way, I noticed a pin attached to the dainty bow, and at first I had a mind to fasten the token to the side of my hat, saying half aloud to myself, “*Par Dieu!* But I will bear this favour to the King to-morrow,” and then I felt I had no right to wear the ribbon, and, changing my intention to do so, thrust it back with a half smile at my folly.

Gradually the moonlight faded into a shimmering mist, through which purple shadows came and went; gradually the mist grew darker and darker, and I fell asleep. My sleep could not have lasted much more than an hour; but so profound was it that ages seemed to have passed when I awoke with a start, and the consciousness of movement around me. The moon was on the wane; but I saw that the camp was astir, and that the men were being mustered as silently as possible.

“So things are about to happen,” I said to myself, recalling de Rône’s words, and hastily saddling my horse, sprang on his back, and moved towards the General’s tent. All around me was the muffled tramp of feet, the jingle of chain-bits and steel scabbards, the plunging of impatient horses, and a subdued hum of voices, above which rose now and again a hoarse word of command, as regiment after regiment wheeled into position on the level stretch before us. Three long black lines were moving noiselessly and rapidly towards the Oise. I knew

they were de Leyva's brigade of Spanish infantry, veterans of the war of Flanders. To my right the occasional flash of a lance-head through the thick haze that was coming up, but which the morning sun would dissipate, showed me where the cuirassiers of Aumale were, and I thought of de Gomeron with regret that I had not finished him before de Rône's inopportune arrival. I had to die, and it might have been some consolation, in such mood was I, to have sent Adam de Gomeron on the dark way before me.

When I reached the General's pavilion de Rône was just mounting his horse, a lackey standing near with a sputtering torch, and his staff in a little clump, a few yards away. I saluted, and he gave me a keen look, saying:

"So you have come, M. d'Auriac—take your place with the staff. I will give you your work later on—and remember."

"I am not likely to forget, M. le Marquis," and I moved off in the direction indicated.

"Is that you, d'Auriac?" "Why have you left the outposts?" "*Sangdieu!* but why did you not come to us last night?" "How is M. de Réthelois, and have you seen the abbess of Ste. Geneviève?"

These and suchlike greetings met me as I was recognised and welcomed by de Belin, the young Tavannes, de Cosse-Brissac, and others of my acquaintance. I replied as best I might, but there was no time for much talk, as the General was moving onwards at a rapid pace, and we were compelled to follow at once. I dropped a little to the rear, to husband the strength of my horse as far as possible, and was joined by another rider.

"Is that you, Belin?"

“*Ma foi!* Yes. It is the devil being hustled up so early in the morning—I am yet but half awake.”

“I was surprised to find you here. I thought you were with the Archduke and de Mayenne.”

“What! have you not heard?”

“What in the devil’s name could I hear on those cursed outposts?”

“Then in your ear—the Rémois have gone from us, and de Mayenne and the Guisard have passed over to the King. My news is certain, and the Archduke has sent a cypher to de Rône bidding him retreat at once on Amiens.”

“But this does not look like a retreat.”

“No; de Rône has lost the key of the cypher.”

We both laughed, and Belin went on: “It was droll. I saw him receive the message, which the old fox must have read at a glance. But he turned it this way and that, and looking at Egmont, said as calmly as possible, ‘Ride back to Amiens and fetch me the key. I have lost mine and cannot follow the cypher’—but hark!” and Belin interrupted himself, “there is de Réthelois’ good morning.”

Even as he spoke three bright flashes came from the citadel of La Fère, and the big guns from the bastion of Ste. Geneviève boomed sullenly into the morning. Then a long streak of fire ran across the grey mist, followed by the angry crackle of the petronels, above which the reports of the bombards of the trench-masters, as they replied to de Réthelois’ artillery, sounded like strokes on a war drum.

“*Ventre St. Gris!* The Spaniards have drawn first blood, Belin.”

“M. d’Auriac!”

The Chevalier d’Auriac.

De Rône's voice stopped any further talk, and I spurred to his side.

"My compliments to the Conde de Leyva and ask him not to waste time spitting at de Réthelois—tell him to leave a sufficient force to hold the garrison in check, and move across the river towards St. Gobains—report yourself to me at the ford."

I galloped off, and when I reached the Spaniard, whom I found with some difficulty, I discovered that he had already anticipated de Rône's orders, and had besides almost cut off a sortie from the city. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to wish de Leyva a pleasant day and to go on to the ford.

And now a pale band of orange stretched across the east, and daylight rapidly came. A fair breeze sprang up with the sun, blowing the vapour into long feathery clouds that rolled slowly to the west. So heavy was the fire de Réthelois kept up from the citadel that its square keep was entirely hidden by the smoke; but as I rode towards the ford down the long slope that ended in the Red Mill, I saw on my right the whole of de Rône's army, advancing to the river in long even columns, and on my left, where they appeared to have sprung up by magic, two strong bodies of cavalry, whilst behind them, marching as rapidly as our own troops, and in as perfect order, came the men of Arques and Ivry, of Fontaine Française, and all the hundred fights of Henry of Navarre.

By this time I had come to the outpost, and found the thatched roof of the cottage in flames, the result of a stray shell that had dropped through it, and blown down half of the remaining walls. It was clearly empty, but as I trotted past the thorn hedge I saw, about fifty paces or so to my right, a single horseman under a tree. His

hands were tied behind him, and a cord, which hung from a branch overhead, ended in a noose secured lightly but firmly round his neck. His position was such that if the horse moved away from beneath him he would hang, and the poor wretch was absorbed in coaxing the animal to remain steady; but the trooper he bestrode had already scented the coming battle. His ears were cocked, his tail held out in an arch, and he was pawing at the ground with his forefoot. I could not hear what the man was saying, but his lips were moving, I doubt not with mingled prayers and curses, and I could see that he was trying to restrain the animal by the pressure of his knees. Another look showed me it was Nicholas, the sergeant, and knowing there was little leisure to lose if the knave was to be saved, I put spurs to my beast and headed towards him. I was just in time, for as I started the old trooper gave a loud neigh, flourished his heels in the air, and galloped off towards the enemy, with his mane and tail streaming in the wind. A touch of my sword freed Nicholas, but it was a narrow affair, and he lay gasping on the ground, and as he lay there I noticed that his ears had been cropped close to his head, and that the wounds were quite fresh. He recovered himself in about a minute, for the dog was tough as leather, and was about to pour forth his thanks and tell me how he came in such plight, but, sincerely sorry as I was, I had to cut him short.

“Keep the story for another day, Nicholas,” I said, “and follow the example of your horse, who I see is a loyal subject, and has gone straight back to the King.”

With these words I spurred onwards, leaving Nicholas to follow my advice or not, as he listed. I had gathered

enough, however, to find out that he was a victim to M. de Gomeron's ingenious humour. Little did I think, however, when I saved this poor fellow how amply I would be requited hereafter.

I reached the ford just before the General, and saw that our right flank had already crossed the river in the far distance. Opposite us the Royalists appeared to be in some confusion; but in a moment they were restored to order, and moved steadily on.

"The King is there," burst out Belin, and a grim smile passed over de Rône's features as he nodded his head slightly in token of assent. As Belin spoke a group of about half a dozen riders galloped from the enemy's van, and, coming straight towards us, halted a bare hundred paces or so from the river bank. The leading horseman was mounted on a bay charger, and it needed not a second glance, nor a look at the white plumes in his helmet, to tell that it was Henry himself. Close beside him was a short, dark, thickset man, with the jewel of the Order of France at his neck. He managed the grey he rode with infinite skill, and with his drawn sword pointed towards us, seemed to be urging something on the King.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"The King's viper," answered Belin, "who will sting him some day: do you not know Biron? *Mordieu!*" he added, turning to de Rône, "shall we end the war, General; we could do it with a bit of lead that wouldn't cost the tenth part of a tester?"

De Rône's brown cheek paled at the words, and for an instant he seemed to hesitate, and I could well understand his temptation.

"No," he replied—"drop that," he thundered to a

musketeer who was poisoning his piece, and the man fell back with a disappointed air.

"*Peste!*" grumbled Belin, "we might have all been in Paris within the week, whereas now it will take a fortnight at the least."

"Or a month, or a year, or never—eh, Belin," gibed de Tavannes.

"Do you think the fair Angélique will be constant?" asked another.

Belin glanced at the laced favour in his hat with a smile, and answered: "God bless our ladies! They know how to be constant—see there, messieurs," and he pointed to a single figure, mounted on a barb, that rode out of the French lines and galloped forward, alone and unattended, to the side of the King. We saw as the barb approached that the figure was that of a woman, and, moreover, that of a very beautiful woman. She was dressed in a hunting habit of dark green, with a black hat and black feathers, under which we could see the light of her fair hair. As she reined up beside the King, Henry turned to her, as if expostulating, but she bent forward suddenly and kissed his hand, and then with charming courtesy took out her kerchief and waved it at us in dainty greeting.

"'Tis Gabrielle, the Duchesse de Beaufort herself!" exclaimed de Tavannes, and then gave tongue in a ringing cheer, which was taken up by us all, and rolled down the long line of battle, till its echoes reached us from even the furthest wings.

De Rône lifted his plumed hat in response to Madame d'Estrées' greeting, and the King, bowing slightly to us from his saddle, put his hand on the barb's reins, and

turning the horse's head, galloped his mistress to a place of safety. As they reached the mound whereon the royal guidon was displayed, we heard the opening bars of the Pont d'Audemer march, and as they ceased a red tongue of flame licked out from behind a cornfield and a masked battery opened on us.

CHAPTER III.

THE RED CORNFIELD.

"M. LE MARQUIS, the Conde de Leyva begs for help urgently."

"Tell him I have none to give," de Rône made answer from his big black charger Couronne. "*Sangdieu!*" he added under his breath, "had we been but three hours earlier the Béarnais was lost."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the cavalier to whom they were addressed threw up his arms with a scream, and falling forward from his horse, began to beat at the earth convulsively with his hands, whilst he gasped out his life. As the death-glaze was covering his eyes, his empty saddle was filled by a figure that rose up like a sprite through the dim smoke, and Belin's even voice was heard.

"Poor Garabay! But my horse was shot under me an hour ago, and this one will do me excellently. Shall I carry your message, General?"

"I claim the honour, Marquis; do not deny me, Belin. I have been idle too long," and I pressed forward as I spoke.

"Oh, I yield to you, d'Auriac! there is work enough for me at the other end; the bear of Aumale is dancing to a fine tune there," and Belin reined back, whilst de Rône nodded assent, with a meaning in his look that I alone understood.

I needed no second bidding, but turning my Norman's rein, galloped down the blazing line of battle. If I escaped through the day, which to my mind was already lost, I knew full well that de Rône, smarting under disappointment and chagrin at defeat, would be in no temper for mercy, and would certainly keep his word to me.

There was not a doubt of it, but that the issue of the day was at a crisis. On our extreme right d'Aumale and the exiles of France were pitted against the Huguenot battalions, who went into battle with a hymn on their lips, and had sworn by the faith for which so many of them had died never to quit the field alive. Be sure they strove bitterly there, for the hatreds of sixty years had met face to face on their last field, and no quarter was asked or given. In the centre Bouillon, the Turenne of other days, and Biron—men whose very names were victory—led the attack, which was slowly but surely driving us back into the river. At one time indeed the fiery marshal, with the exception of the King perhaps the most brilliant cavalry leader of the age, had all but laid hands on our standard, and so close was he to me that I might have counted the jewels of the Order at his neck, and clearly heard his deep "*Mordieu!*" as he slowly gave way before the desperate rally that for the moment retrieved the day. But it was on our left that the greatest danger lay. Henry's rapid movement during the night had forestalled de Rône's plans, and had practically shut in the left wing of the Leaguer general between two fires. For although de Réthelois was penned into La Fère, yet his artillery had a long reach and galled us in the rear, whilst the King, fully grasping the situation, opened a heavy fire on our front, and that terrible battery from the cornfield never ceased launching forth its messages of death. These

guns, no longer hidden by the tall corn-stalks, now beaten and trampled down, and as red as the poppies that once starred them, were in reality deciding the fortune of the day. Twice had de Leyva in person brought the veteran regiments of Almagro and Algarve up to their very muzzles, until the men could have touched them with their Biscay pikes, and twice had they been flung back, but made good their retreat, beating off the charge of Schomberg's reiters in so savage a manner that the free commander was unable to rally his men for the rest of the day.

I let my beast go with a loose head, and there was no need of the spur to urge him to his utmost effort as he bore me to de Leyva. I found him bare-headed and on foot, his face black with smoke and bleeding from wounds. His *toison d'or* had been shot away, though its jewelled collar still clasped his neck, and his left arm hung useless by his side. He stared at me when I gave him de Rône's answer, to which I added the news that Garabay was dead. Then he laughed through his cracked lips—a laugh that seemed to stick in the knot of his throat, and making me no further reply, waved his sword in the air with a cry on his men for yet another effort, and a forlorn hope at the guns. And they who had never known defeat before answered to his call and came up again—a line of men for whom the bitterness of death was passed. I ought to have gone back to de Rône, but the lust of battle was on me, and for me there was nothing in the world but the black guns behind the continuous flashes, lightening through the thick smoke which the wind was blowing in our faces. My brave horse was killed by a round shot, and as I scrambled up and took my place by de Leyva's side, his features relaxed and he said with a thin smile:

"I have had both my horses killed, Chevalier, or would offer you a mount."

"We will replace them from Schomberg's reiters," and the bugles, sounding the attack, cut short all further talk. It was win or lose now—all was staked upon this hazard, and it was well for us that Schomberg was broken, for to protect the men as far as possible from the guns, de Leyva advanced in open files. There was to be no firing. The work was to be all cold steel, and Bayonne knife and Biscay pike were to make a last effort against the long, black, snarling guns, behind which d'Aussonville's ordnance men yelped and danced with glee as each discharge brought down its tale of the mangled and dead. But up the long slope, never flinching, never swerving, one man stepping where another fell, the veteran regiments marched, with their gallant chief at their head. When about fifty paces away, the drift was so thick that we could see nothing save the incessant flashes of light, which possessed but power enough to show themselves. At this moment the bugles rang out shrilly, the ranks closed up like magic, there was one tremendous roar of artillery, and the half of us that were left were in the battery. Here, on the red and slippery corn-stalks, the devilry went on, and men fought more like beasts than human beings. As the heaving mass swayed backwards and forwards, the strong breeze lifted the smoke from the now speechless guns and showed that they were won, but it also showed us another sight, and that was de Rône's broken centre doubling back upon us in utter rout, and behind them a silver line of shining helmets as the King's House charged, led by Henry himself.

On they came, a dancing line of light, a gleam of

shining swords, with the white plume of the bravest of them full three lengths in front.

"Vive le Roi!" The breeze flung us the deep-mouthed cheer as they broke through the mailed ranks of de Rône's own cuirassiers, and drove horse and foot, knight and knave, in a huddled mob before them.

It may have been fancy, but I thought I saw in the press a dark figure that suddenly turned the reins of a huge, black charger and flew at the King. For an instant two bright sword blades crossed in the air, and then the black horse plunged riderless into the grey spate of smoke that the wind was bearing westwards, and a groan as of despair fell on my ears.

"Vive le Roi!" Once again came the full-throated cry, and the bay horse was galloping towards us, followed by the line of swords, no longer shining, but dulled and red with the slaughter they had made.

From a heap of dead and dying that lay about two yards off me, a figure, so hideous with wounds that it seemed barely human, rose to a sitting posture, and then staggering to its feet, swayed backwards and forwards, with the fragment of a sword still clutched in its hand. With a supreme effort it steadied itself, and as the poor, mad eyes, alive with pain, caught sight of the enemy, they lit again with the fire of battle, and de Leyva's voice rang out strong and clear as of old:

"The guns—the guns—turn them on the King!"

"They are spiked," someone gave answer, with a grim, hopeless laugh.

As he heard this reply, de Leyva slipped sideways, and would have fallen had I not sprang forward and supported him with my arm. He leaned his smitten frame against me for a moment, and something that was like a

sob burst from him. But he recovered himself on the instant, and with the strength so often given to those who are about to die, pushed me aside with an oath, and shaking his broken blade in the face of the advancing line, fell forwards in a huddled mass, a dead man.

The next moment the enemy were on us. We met them with a row of pikes; but what could we do, for we were few in number, weary with the long struggle, and weak with wounds? The issue was never in doubt, and they broke us at once. I have a vague memory of fighting for dear life amidst a thunder of hoofs, and the hissing sweep of swords, but was ridden down by someone, and all became dark around me.

When my mind came back, it was with the consciousness of rain that was falling softly, and the cool drops plashed on my burning head with a sensation of relief that I cannot describe. I suffered from an intolerable thirst, and strove to rise that I might find means to quench it; but found I was powerless to move, and writhed in my agony in the rut amidst the corn-stalks wherein I had fallen. The rain was but a passing shower, and when it ceased a light but cool breeze sprang up. It was night, and a fitful moon shone through the uneasy clouds that hurried to and fro overhead in the uncertain breeze, which shifted its quarter as often as a child might change its mind. I seemed to be alive only in the head, and began to wonder to myself how long I was to lie there until death came, and with it the end of all things. I began to wish it would come quickly, and there was a secret whispering in my soul to pray—to pray to the God of whom I had never thought since childhood—to entreat that Invisible Being, at whose existence I had so

often laughed, to stoop from above the stars and end my pain, and I cursed myself for a white-livered cur that forgot the Godhead in my strength, and in my weakness could almost have shrieked to him for help. I pulled my fainting courage up, as I thought that if there was no God, it was useless wasting my breath in calling on him, whilst if, on the other hand, there was one, no prayer of mine could go higher than my sword's point, were I to hold the blade out at arm's length above me—and now that the end was coming, I was not going to cringe and whimper. So my sinful pride caught me by the heel as I lay there in my dolour.

A half-hour or so may have passed thus, and the moon was now almost entirely obscured. Occasionally I could hear through the darkness around me the moaning of some poor wounded wretch, and now and again rose the shrill discordant shriek of a maimed horse, an awful cry of pain, the effect of which those only who may have heard it can understand. Soon a number of twinkling lights began to hover over the plain. Sometimes they moved forward rapidly, sometimes they were raised and lowered, and at other times stationary. Gradually two of these lanterns came closer to me, stopping about ten paces off, and when I saw who bore them I knew at once they were death-hunters, and that in a few moments the knife of one of these ghouls might end my suffering. There were two of these fiends, a man and a woman, and as they halted the man stooped: there was a choking cry for mercy, the blow of a dagger, and a groan. The robber busied himself in searching the dead man's person, and, in the silence that followed, the woman with him threw up her head and laughed a horrid shrill laugh. It pealed out with so eerie a sound that the death-hunter sprang

to his feet; but finding who it was, burst into the foulest language.

"*Sangdieu!* Be still, fool," he snarled, "or you'll laugh another way if I tickle you with my knife."

"Oh, ho! The brave Mauginot," answered the she-devil, "you will tickle me with your butcher knife—will you? I, too, can make you skip," and she shook a bright dagger in her long lean arm, but suddenly changing her tone, "Pouf!" she said, "there is no use in squabbling, partner. This is the sixth we have helped to hell to-night, and not a broad piece amongst them. Holy Virgin! This is a field of paupers—let us begone!" and to my joy she made as if to go.

"Stay, Babette! what shines there?" and Mauginot ran forward a couple of paces, and bending low wrenched something from a body, and then stood up, holding it to the light.

I saw his face clearly, and saw also his prize. It was poor de Leyva's collar of the Golden Fleece, and the blood-stained hand of the *croquemort* held it up to the lantern, and clinked the jewelled links, whilst he feasted his eyes on the gold and gems. Over his shoulders peered the pitiless features of his partner, and in her eyes blazed all the bad light of avarice and murder. I almost held my breath as I watched the eyes of the woman leave the jewel and turn on the man with death in their look. As for him, he was unconscious of the knife quivering in the nervous fingers behind him, and he chuckled over his find.

"That is the collar of the *Toison d'Or*, Babette. *Sacre chien!* But I will wed you, and we will buy an estate and settle down, and you will be Madame de Mauginot—hey! That carrion there must have been a great prince—

a field of paupers—bah! Give me more paupers like this. I am sorry he is dead, Babette, I would like to have—Ah, *mon Dieu!*—you devil! you devil!” for as he babbled on, his words were cut short by Babette’s knife, which was buried to the hilt between his shoulder-blades, and he fell on his knees and then lurched on his face stone dead. The murderess made a snatch at the jewel, which I saw her conceal, and then with a mocking “Adieu, M. *de* Mauginot!” to her victim, stepped over my body and moved out of sight, swinging her lantern, and laughing low to herself.

As I watched this hideous scene, I for the moment forgot the pain of my hurts; but they soon began to assert themselves in such a manner that I longed for the relief that unconsciousness would afford, nor indeed would I have been sorry if the night-hag, Babette, had come back and put an end to me. My senses half failed me again, and I felt myself tottering on the brink of delirium. I caught myself shouting and speaking out aloud in a mad manner; but I had no power of stopping myself. So the long hours of the night passed, and at last it was dawn once more, and morning came.

Lying with my ear against the ground, I heard the dull beat of horses’ hoofs, growing louder and more distinct as they approached, and in a little time the party, whoever they were, rode into the cornfield. For a second my eyes were dazzled by the reflection of the sun on the silver-plate of their armour; but I recovered myself with an effort, and watched eagerly, intending to cry out for help as they passed me, for my voice was too weak to reach where they were. There were two ladies amongst them, and all appeared to be looking with much concern and anxiety for someone. As they came closer I saw it

was the King himself, with Madame Gabrielle and another lady, doubtless of the court, and a numerous retinue. Henry was mounted on his famous bay charger; and, as he lifted his hat and looked silently around him, I had good opportunity of observing the man who was without doubt the most heroic figure of the age, and who united in himself the most opposite extremes of character. I saw before me a spare figure, the head covered with short black hair, a long hooked nose that fell over the upper lip, and a sharp protruding chin, half hidden in a beard tinged with grey. His long curled moustaches were white as snow, and the story went that they had become so on the night when the Edicts of Pacification were revoked by the last of the Valois. Under his bushy eyebrows his keen restless eyes glittered like two beads, but for the moment they seemed dilated with a soft light, and there was an infinite sadness in them as he looked round the bloody field.

"I am afraid we search in vain, madame," and a tall cavalier mounted on a big bay addressed Madame de Beaufort. She nodded her head to him sadly, and turned to the King.

"It is useless, sire, and I can bear this no longer—it is too horrible—let us go."

"*Mignonne*, you are right—this is no place for you. Roquelaure will see you and your little friend there back, and I will come to you soon—but now I have a letter to write—just a few lines to Béarn." The King spoke with a strong southern accent, and as he spoke leaned forward and caressed Madame Gabrielle's hand. She, however, declined to go. "I will wait, sire, but it shall be with my eyes shut," and the King's mistress, whose cheeks were very pale, put her hand to her eyes as if to shut out the

sight around her. The lady with Madame de Beaufort coming nearer at this time, I recognised my unknown Madame of the outposts, who had evidently found her way back to her friends. But it was with a bitter disappointment that I saw her in the company of the duchess, and evidently in attendance on her. Madame was nothing to me, I thought, but I could not associate her with the fallen woman who was the mistress of the King. I was learning the lesson that love comes on a man like a thief in the night, and, unconsciously to myself, Madame had climbed on a pinnacle in my heart, and the thought that I had deceived myself in my estimate of her moved me to sudden anger, and stilled the cry for help that was rising to my lips—I would have no help from her and her friends.

In the meantime the King was busily engaged in writing his despatch on a small tablet, which he rested on the pommel of his saddle, and as he wrote he repeated the words aloud, and the purport of the note, which was to de la Force at Pau, was to send him a dozen young peach-trees, carefully packed in mould, each in a tin case one foot long, these to be planted in his gardens of St. Germain.

As he was thus engaged, a little shrivelled old man pushed his horse beside Madame de Beaufort, and said in mincing tones as hard as steel, "Come, madame, your brother has met a soldier's death, and no Frenchman can hope for a better—or he is safe and well somewhere. Dry your tears, and rejoice at the glorious victory we have won." The duchess made some answer in a broken voice, and the King, hearing her, stopped writing and put his tablet away.

"*M'amyé!* D'Ayen speaks rightly, though he speaks

from the head. God keep us from more scenes like this. As for your brother, de Cœuvres, I will not rest till there is news of him; but now we can do no more. Come, then—open your pretty eyes and we will go—there is much on hand.”

I was a hot-headed fool and furious in those days, and I set my teeth together grimly as they made ready to start, swearing I would rather die than make the slightest signal for aid. They rode past quite close to me—Gabrielle weeping at the King's bridle hand, and his Majesty sucking at a nectarine he had pulled from his holster. Madame was immediately behind, and as she came up to me, our eyes met with an instant recognition. In a moment her cheek had crimsoned and paled, and she reined in with a cry:

“Stop—halt!”

“It is Louis—Louis—O God, no!” exclaimed Madame de Beaufort, swinging round, the glad note in her voice breaking as she saw I was not her brother, de Cœuvres; but Madame had already dismounted and was holding my head up, and gently passing a handkerchief over my face.

They had all surrounded me now, and I heard quick orders given.

“He is past mending,” said d'Ayen, bending over me from his saddle, “a gentleman, too, it seems. Let him lie there—he will die very soon, poor devil!”

“*Mon Dieu!* No!” broke in the duchess, and Madame looked at the speaker with a cold contempt.

“He is the only man living here,” and the strong accent of the Béarnais came as from a distance; “*Ventre-saint-Gris!* But they fought like paladins, and, Frenchman or foreigner, he shall be saved if it can be done.”

"Sire," said a soft voice, "you are the true King of the brave."

Then two men-at-arms raised me with a rough gentleness on their crossed spears, and inflicted on me in their kindness the most infinite torture. The King himself pressed a flask of wine to my lips, and, as I drank greedily, two cool hands held up my head. Then we moved on slowly, Madame refusing to ride, but walking by my side, and supporting my burning head.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHATEAU DE LA BIDACHE.

MONTHS had passed since I shook hands with death in the cornfield by the banks of the Oise, and the grass was tall and green on the mounds around La Fère which marked the graves of those who had fought and died there, in reality for the hand of Spain, in spirit for the League that was dead. It was autumn now, and as I, well and strong again, walked down the long avenue of beeches that led to the park gates of Bidache, I let my memory run back to the days in the hospital of Ste. Geneviève, whither I was borne from the field; to the soft-voiced, gentle-handed sisters of mercy; to the physician Marescot, the King's own leech, with his acid face and kind heart, who doctored me; and above all to the tall, slight, black-robed figure that came to see me daily, and for whose coming I used to long, in the dreary hours of my pain, with an infinite desire. I argued with myself on the absurdity of the thing—here was I, hardened by ten years of campaigning which ought to have taught me the world, conquered out of hand by the glance of a pair of bright eyes, and the tones of a sweet voice. As the days wore on, I cursed myself for the unworthy suspicions that had come to me and tied my tongue when I lay wounded, and was rescued by chance, and her charity. Who or what she was I cared not, and recklessly abandoned myself to the feelings that were aroused in my heart.

I shall not forget what happened one afternoon. A long gallery in the convent of St. Geneviève had been turned into a ward, and here the wounded lay on pallets with a walking space between. Owing to Madame's kindness I was comfortably quartered at the end of the gallery, and a screen had been set between me and the other patients. I was gaining strength daily, and, at the moment I speak of, was in a state between sleeping and waking, when I heard a laugh and the sound of footsteps, and saw through the partly open wing of the screen that my lady had come to make her daily rounds, not attended as usual only by her women, but by a gaily-dressed cavalier as well, and it was his laugh that I had heard. In this person, dressed in the extreme of fashion, I made out M. d'Ayen, the same who had so kindly suggested that I should be left to die in the field. He pattered along, holding a kerchief edged with gold lace to his nose, and ever and again waving it in the air, whilst he spoke in a loud tone, regardless of the looks cast at him by the sisters in attendance on the wounded. They came slowly towards me, for Madame stayed constantly to speak to some maimed wretch, and I saw her slip money into the hands of some, and there were kind words for all. I felt a strange pleasure in watching her, whilst at the same time I thought of my past, and how unfit I was even to nurse such a dream as my love for her. When within a yard or so of the screen, Madame bent over a sufferer, and d'Ayen exclaimed in his biting voice—

“*Morbleu!* Madame! But you are the Princess of Charity. Let us hasten to your interesting patient, however. His Majesty is most anxious to hear of him.”

“His Majesty has never done me the honour to inquire,” she answered coldly.

"You could hardly expect that, madame. But it came about in this way. We were at flux, and as usual I held a bad cassade——"

But Madame, to whom his presence was unwelcome, waited to hear no more, and passing the screen, came to my side, and would have spoken; d'Ayen, however, cut in with a rudeness for which I could have run him through.

"My compliments, M. d'Auriac. You are a lucky man. The King takes so great an interest in you that he has charged me with a message to you. His Majesty bids me say," and his bead-like eyes twinkled down on me from his painted cheeks, and then turned sily towards Madame.

I waited for him to continue, and he went on, talking as if his words were meant for Madame as well.

"His Majesty trusts you will soon be recovered, and relieve Madame de la Bidache from the strain of watching you, and begs me to add that he is of a temper that can brook no rival in war—or love. Let me say, on my own account, that it would be well if M. le Chevalier would take a change of air."

I looked from one to another in blank amaze—at the little ape with his cruel eyes, and at Madame, who was still as a stone. Then she coloured to her eyelids, her hands fell clenched to her side, and she turned on d'Ayen.

"Such a message, monsieur, should not have been delivered before me. I will take care that M. d'Auriac has a change of air; and, monsieur, your presence oppresses me. I beg you will not trouble to escort me farther."

Then she turned from us and passed down the ward, but d'Ayen remained.

"I will kill you for this," I gasped.

He looked at me with a shrug of his lean shoulders.

"Perhaps—I am old. But you would do well to take my advice, monsieur," and with a bow he too turned and went.

I was left lost in wonder, utterly in the dark as to what this all meant, but determined to find out and bring d'Ayen to book at the first chance. I made up my mind to ask the next day. The next day came; but Madame did not, and then another and yet another day of dreariness passed. At last someone, I forget who, told me she had gone with the court to Nantes, and that I would see her no more. Later on, when Marescot came to me, I begged the favour of his getting me the knot of ribbon he would find in the left-hand breast pocket of the doublet I wore on the day I was brought into the hospital.

"You are getting well," he said, and turned away, but came back in a little with a wrinkled smile on his lips, "I cannot find the cordial you want, Chevalier."

I had half raised my head in expectancy as he returned, but sank back again at his words, and Marescot went on in his low voice that sounded like the humming of a bee. "M. le Chevalier, that bow of ribbon has gone away, so high up that a taller man than you could not reach it. Forget it. But I have news for you, which the clumsy fool who told you of Madame's departure should have given you: you are to go to Bidache shortly, and stay there until you are well again. It will not be for long. After that, try the tonic of the Italian war. France will be all plough-shares now that the King is king."

I caught him by the sleeve of his soutane. "Tell me," I said weakly, "who is Madame, where is Bidache?"

"Madame, as we all call her, is Claude de Roche-

mars, widow of Antoine de la Tremouille, and heiress of Bidache, Pelouse, and a quarter of the Cevennes. Bidache, where you go, is her chateau in Normandy. Madame," he went on with a ghost of a smile on his thin lips, "is kindness itself. Now no more talk for to-day." Then he went, and I lay back, as sore in mind as in body.

In a day or so Madame's steward of Bidache arrived, bearing a letter from her, in which, a poor return for the service I had done her—so she put it—she placed her Norman chateau at my disposal until I was well again. I had a mind to refuse; but in my state could summon up no such resolution, and, muttering my thanks to the steward, said they could do what they listed with me. They moved me here by easy stages, carrying me in a litter as I was too weak to ride, and when I came to Bidache, and was borne to my apartments, imagine my joy and surprise at seeing there my knave Jacques, whom I thought to be either dead or home again at Auriac; and not only Jacques, but hanging on the wall my own sword, and the sight of it was like meeting a tried friend. Later on, Jacques informed me that after the rout he had made the best of his way back to the old rock, and stayed there, hoping for news of me. At last it came, with orders for him to hurry to Bidache, and he did so, bearing with him such things as he thought I needed, as well as a hundred pistoles of rents, the same being half the sum due to me for my rights over the fish in the bay of Auriac. As for the sword, it had been given to him on his arrival by Madame's orders to keep for me. I had come to a low ebb by this, and the money was trebly welcome, as it would furnish me with a couple of horses, and leave a round sum besides when I left Bidache, which I meant to do as soon as ever I was fit to travel. And

now the time had come for me to depart, and I was to start that evening. For forty crowns Jacques had picked up a couple of stout cobs at Evreux, and we meant to leave an hour or so before sundown and make for Paris, where, if the King would accept an old leaguer's sword, we would stay; if not, the world was wide. I was as far as ever from understanding the strange message that M. d'Ayen had delivered to me, and felt myself safe in going to Paris, as a general amnesty covered all our sins of rebellion—so they were called now.

So absorbed was I in these thoughts, that I did not mark the rapid approach of a horseman, nor indeed was I aware of his presence until, when within a few yards of me, he reigned in his plunging beast, whose bit and neck were white with foam, and lifting his hat respectfully, inquired if I was the Chevalier d'Auriac and on my reply exclaimed, "Madame will be overjoyed. We heard that you had already left Bidache, and my lady arrives within the hour from Evreux. Pardon, monsieur—I go to give the news to the household," and, saluting again, the lackey dashed onwards towards the chateau.

So I would meet her within the hour. Half unconsciously I glanced down to see if my doublet sat aright and my points were tied. Then I thought I would go back to the house and meet her there, and, as I did this, I looked at the fall of the plumes in my hat, and, finally, laughing at myself for a coxcomb, took my heart in both hands, and marched onwards towards the gates. The porter had already been warned, and on my coming I found him there with a crowd of yokels, all in a state of high excitement.

"It is three years since Madame was here, monsieur," the honest fellow exclaimed to me as I came up, "three

years, and now she comes without a word of warning—*hola!* There they are, and there is Madame on the jennet she purchased from M. le duc de Sully—he was but the Sieur de Rosny then—*hola! hola!*”

The crowd joined with him in his cheers, although as yet the party was far off—not so far, however, that I could not easily make out the graceful figure on the jennet, and in the two riders who accompanied Madame, apart from the half-dozen servants behind, I recognised to my surprise d'Ayen, and guessed that the greybeard in the tall-crowned, broad-brimmed hat, with the sad-coloured cloak over his shoulders, was no other than the old Huguenot, whose zeal had outrun his discretion on the night when I saved Madame from a great peril.

This guess of mine I hazarded aloud to the gate-keeper, who replied:

“Yes, M. le Chevalier, that is Maître Palin, Madame’s chaplain, and he was also chaplain to M. le Comte before he died.”

“When was it that M. le Comte died?”

“Let me see, monsieur—ah, yes—four years ago in Paris, at the time of the Plague. He was a great lord, as you may know, and brother of the duke, who they say has quarrelled with the King because of his conversion, and of Madame Charlotte, the Princess of Condé, who lives in the Rue Grenelle, and whom the King kept for long a close prisoner in the tower of St. Jean d’Angely—no one knows why; but it is buzzed that Monseigneur, the Prince of Condé, the King’s cousin, died of a flask of wine, and that the Princess—but *hola! hola!* welcome to your own house, madame,” and he dropped on his knees as the cavalcade rode up, and presented the keys of the chateau gates slung on a silver chain to their mistress.

She bent from the saddle and touched them with her hand, and the peasantry surrounded her with hearty greeting, hedging her in with cheerful red faces and broad smiles, so that she could not move. Meanwhile, I stood apart, tugging at my moustache, wondering by what right d'Ayen rode at her bridle hand, and feeling how true Marescot's words were, that the bow of ribbon was hung too high for me. Not that it was a question of birth—de Breuil of Auriac was a name that was old when Tremouille was unknown; but—there were other things which made all the difference, and men and women of the world will understand what I mean when I say this.

As Madame lifted her head our eyes met, and, raising my hat, I advanced towards her, the people giving way respectfully. My ears were buzzing, and I was as shy and nervous as a schoolboy as I bowed over her gloved hand, and touched it with my lips.

"Let me welcome you back to health, Chevalier," she said, "and say how glad I am to be able, even for a short while, to do the honours of my poor house in person to you. News came to us that you had already left Bidache—without even a word to me;" her voice dropped a little as she said this, but the tone was cool and friendly, nothing more.

"I go to-night, madame."

"So soon; but I understand why, and will not press you to stay—here is one who, like myself, has longed for an opportunity to thank you in person. *Mon père*," and she turned to the Huguenot priest, "this is our friend to whom we owe so much."

"In the service of the Lord one would willingly lay down life," said Palin, as he shook me warmly by the hand, "nevertheless, a few hours more of the world for an

old man is a grace not to be despised, and I thank the instrument that has bestowed this benefit upon me."

D'Ayen, between whom and myself there had passed no greeting, now spoke in a voice that fairly trembled with anger.

"I was not aware that I should have the pleasure of meeting you here, M. le Chevalier. It will surprise the King," he added, in a lower tone to Madame.

I made no answer; but the memory of his warning and my determination to settle with him came up in full force. Madame, however, spoke.

"M. d'Ayen, when, by the order of the King, you were directed to escort me to Bidache, there was nothing said about your right to dictate to me who shall be my guests. Remember, monsieur, that your company is forced upon me, and let me add that you are a trifle too paternal."

D'Ayen paled under his rouge, and, muttering something, reined back a pace, whilst Palin, looking him full in the eyes, said:

"Will you swallow that, too, M. d'Ayen? At your age one would have thought digestion hard."

And there was no answer.

Madame had in the meantime signalled a lackey to dismount and offer me his beast.

"I cannot allow you to walk, and we will reach the house quicker in this way, besides, I want to hear all your news. My friends," and she turned to the people, "come to Bidache: it is long since we have met, and I would have you to make merry as of old—come, Chevalier."

In the cheers which followed, she touched her horse lightly on the shoulder with her whip, and galloped on, Palin and I on either hand, and the suite behind. In a

little while she slackened pace, saying with a laugh, "We are going too fast to talk, Chevalier, and I am a woman, you know, and must hear my own voice, if nothing else—so you are quite well and strong again?"

"I am, madame, thanks to your kindness, which Alban de Breuil can never forget."

Her colour deepened slightly. "It is the other way, Chevalier, the debt is on my side."

"I have done nothing—and the repayment was too much."

"I am sorry you think so," looking straight between her horse's ears.

"I did not mean that—I have already said I can never requite your kindness, and if Madame ever needs a stout arm and a good sword, it is my hope she will call on that of Auriac."

"Perhaps I may—some day," she answered, "for the blood of my fathers runs strong in me, but I think Maître Palin here will tell you that I am wrong, and that the sword is accursed."

"Unless it be drawn in the service of God, madame," put in the Huguenot gravely.

"*Mon père* Palin has been a man-at-arms in his day," said Madame, "and has fought at Jarnac and Moncontour. He is therefore of the church militant, as you see."

"I am proud to meet so brave a soldier as I doubt not you were, Maître Palin. We took different sides; but all that is passed now, and Huguenot and Leaguer are merged in the common name of Frenchman."

"Long live the King!" said Madame gaily; but Palin answered sadly:

"Would it were so. But to my eyes there are still

dark clouds ahead. We have no longer Henry of Navarre, but Henry of France; no longer a prince of the true faith, but a pervert."

"His Majesty will be delighted to hear that," put in d'Ayen; but Madame took no more notice of him than of a fly.

"Hush! *mon père*," and she raised a warning hand, "I will have no word against the King. M. le Chevalier is right, we are all one again, as France should ever be."

"Amen!" answered Palin; "but too much blood has been shed for this compromise to be accepted. The way is dark—but I will say no more," and the old croaker dropped a half-length behind.

A turn in the avenue at this moment brought us in full view of the grey walls of Bidache, and on the wide stone staircase that led to the great hall we saw the servants of the household assembled. Madame waved her hand in greeting, and the cheer which broke from them was drowned in the boom of the bombard from the keep. As the blue wreaths of smoke curled upwards a little ball ran to the top of the flagstaff on the keep, and the next moment the banner of Tremouille, with the arms of Rochemars of Bidache quartered thereon, spread out its folds to the morning, and Madame was come home once more.

We dined an hour or so later than usual, Madame, d'Ayen, Palin, and myself at the high table, and the rest of the household with all Bidache at the next. Madame, who seemed in nowise fatigued by her long ride, was in the gayest of spirits and rippled with talk. As if thinking she had punished d'Ayen enough, she directed all her conversation towards him, and the old beau was in his element in discussing the intrigues of court life, and, let

me add, interesting, for his memory went far back. Madame spoke of the Edict, but for which they would never have been at Bidache; of the surrender of Mercoeur, and of the betrothal of his daughter Francoise de Lorraine, the greatest heiress in France, to *César Monsieur*, the little Duc de Vendôme; of the Constable and his disappointment thereat; of the squabbles between M. de Bar and his wife, the King's sister; of court gossip and court scandal, until Palin's face grew sour, and I felt a disappointment within me, as she prattled on like some Paris beauty, whose sole thoughts were of masques at the Louvre and hunting parties at Vincennes. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkled as she discussed with d'Ayen whether the ruff or the collar drooped in the Italian manner was the more becoming, and whether the *cinqe pace* dance was more enjoyable than the minuet. *Pardieu!* Their speech was all frill and furbelows. But for a word thrown in here and there, I sipped my Romanée in silence, wondering at this flow of talk, and wondering, too, at this change of front, and if I was wrong in my estimate of Madame. As she talked, my head for a moment overcame my heart, and I began to judge her in that way, showing, in doing so, my ignorance of that complex thing—a woman.

At last the dinner came to a close, and Palin, rising, opened his lips with a long thanksgiving, to which all, Madame included, listened devoutly. Our hostess then retired, and we three were left together in an absolute silence. Had it been any other place I would have felt bound to call d'Ayen to account, and ask him to name a proxy if he was unable to meet me by reason of his age. But as it was this was impossible, and I contented myself with a frigid reserve, in which I was joined by the

Huguenot. He looked from one to the other of us with a satirical smile on his thin lips, and then rising made a slight bow and left us to ourselves. As we returned to our seats from our response to his greeting, I blurted out the questions:

"Who is M. d'Ayen? Why is he here?"

"Who is he? It is enough to say he is one of those men who live on the follies of kings. And it is enough to say that his company is forced upon us."

"I have heard that before; but Madame seemed to like him well enough at dinner." I felt I was wrong as I said this, but the words came out.

"He is here by the King's orders, by the orders of Henry the Great," said Palin with bitterness. "Monsieur, you seem a man of honour, what do you think of a king who would force a marriage on a woman to——" and he whispered words in my ear which struck me speechless.

I could not believe him. It was incredible. Was this the hero king, the gallant soldier, the father of his people? It could not be true.

Palin saw the doubt on my face.

"Even you," he said; "well, go to Paris and see."

"I shall go, I am going to-day."

"It will be at the risk of your life."

"Maître Palin, there is the King's Peace, and even if it were not so I will go."

He looked at me long and attentively: "Let it be so," he muttered to himself, and then loudly, "Well, Chevalier, I have warned you; if you go you will want a safe lodging—seek out Pantin in the Rue des Deux Mondes, and mention my name. The house faces the Pont Neuf, you can't miss it."

"Thank you, I will do so."

Then after a few minutes more of talk we wished each other good-bye and parted.

As for myself, I was on the cross with what I had heard. My mind was racked with doubt, and at last in despair I sought my own room to think over the matter. I could make nothing of it, turn it which way I would. To me Palin's story was incredible. But yet it explained and made clear so much! It was not to offer my sword only to the King that I would now go to Paris, it would be to save the woman I loved if possible. How I was to do this I had no definite idea, the one thing at present in my mind was Paris, Paris. I therefore gave the necessary orders to Jacques to make ready to start at once, and, descending the winding staircase of the tower wherein my room lay, sought the great hall with the view of either finding Madame there, or of sending someone with the request to permit my waiting on her to say good-bye. The staircase ended in a long dark corridor, hung on each side with trophies of the chase, old armour, and frayed and tattered banners. At the end of this was an arched doorway hidden by a heavy curtain, and above the arch was a half-length portrait of a man. The painter had not flattered his subject; the long pointed face with its grey beard was bent forward slightly, there was a cynical curve to the lips, and the eyes looked down on me as if with a laugh in them. I had passed this picture fifty times before, but had never stayed to examine it. Somehow I did so on this occasion, and as I read the inscription "Antoine de la Tremouille" on the frame, the thin lips appeared to lengthen out into a grin. For a moment a chill fell on me, and then, laughing at myself for a fool, I lifted the curtain and passed into the great hall. At first I thought it was empty, but a second glance

showed me Madame, seated at a small table, in the recess of the bow window that overlooked the park. Her face, leaning on her hand, was half averted from me, and I caught a glimpse of a small foot resting on one of the lions' heads in which the legs of the table finished. The foot was beating up and down as if in unison with the impatience of Madame's thoughts, but I could see nothing of her face beyond its contour. She was, as usual, robed in black, wearing no jewels except a gold collar round her neck. For a moment I stood in silence, looking at her, half thinking that here was a chance to speak out what was in my heart, and then stilling the words by the thought of how impossible it was for a poor man to woo a rich woman.

Through the open window I could see the woods, ruddy in their autumn foliage, and ever and again came the sound of cheerful voices, marking where the good people of Bidache were holding revelry in honour of their mistress' return.

As I stood, hat in hand, Madame suddenly turned with a little start, and hastily concealed something as she caught sight of me. I went up at once, and she rose to meet me.

"I have come to say farewell, madame," and I held out my hand.

"So soon," she said, as she took it for a moment, her eyes not meeting mine.

"Yes—Paris is far—and it will be well for me to be there as quickly as possible."

"Paris! You are surely not—" and she stopped.

"Why not, madame?"

"Oh! I don't know," and hastily, "one sometimes says things that don't exactly convey one's meaning. But I

can imagine why you go to Paris—you are tired of Bidache, and pine for the great city.”

“It is not that; but,” and I pointed to the rolling woods and wide lands that spread before us, “I have no responsibilities like these—and Auriac, which stands by the sea, takes care of itself—besides, I have my way to make as yet.”

“You have friends?”

“One at anyrate, and that was restored to me by you,” and I glanced to the hilt of my sword.

“Man does not want a better; but you have another—here at Bidache, and I shall be in Paris soon, too, and—this place is dull. It kills me.”

“And yet you have not been here for three years—madame, are all the masques at the Louvre so attractive that you can desert your home, where your name is honoured as that of the King, for the follies of the court?”

I spoke with some bitterness, for I was sore at what I had heard at dinner, and she glanced up at me in a slight surprise. Then her lips parted in a half smile. “Chevalier, will you answer me a question or so?”

“Why not?”

“You like gaiety, cheerfulness, light, do you not?”

“Assuredly.”

“You sometimes amuse yourself by gaming, do you not—and losing more than you can afford?”

I bowed in simple wonder.

“That friend of yours at your side has not been drawn only in battle, has it?”

De Gonnor’s white face rose up before me, and I felt my forehead burn. I could make no answer. Madame looked at me for a moment, and then dropped a stately

little courtesy. "Monsieur, you are very good to advise me, and I take your reproof. But surely what is sauce for the gander is sause for the goose. Is not the Chevalier d'Auriac a little hasty? How is it that he is not at home at Auriac, instead of hastening to Paris as fast as he can—to the masques at the Louvre, and the salons of Zamet?"

"It is different," I stammered.

"Ah, yes, it is different," with a superb scorn; "I saw you pull a half league of face as I talked at dinner. Monsieur can go here, Monsieur can go there. He may dance at a revel from curfew till cockcrow, he may stake his estates on a throw of the dice, he may run his friend through for a word spoken in jest—it is all *comme il faut*. But, Madame—she must sit at home with her distaff, her only relaxation a *prêche*, her amusement and joy to await Monsieur's return—is not that your idea, Chevalier?" She was laughing, but it was with a red spot on each cheek.

"Madame," I replied, "when I was but fifteen I joined the Cardinal de Joyeuse, and from that time to now my life has been passed in the field; I am therefore but a soldier, rough of speech, unused to argument, apt to say what is in my mind bluntly. I was wrong to make the remark I did, and ask your pardon; but, madame, brush away the idea that in this case the sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose—I use your own words—think what it would be if all womankind acted on what you have preached—think what would happen if the illusions that surround you, and which are now your strength, are dispelled. The worst of men have some memory of a home made happy by a woman, sister, mother, or wife, and the return to which was like a glimpse into heaven—

the thought of which often made them better men—do not destroy this. And, madame, there is yet another thing—man is a fighting animal, and the final issues of an affair come to the sword—where would a struggle between this hand and mine end?—” in my eagerness I took her small white fingers in mine as I spoke, and shut them within my palm—“Madame,” I continued, “rest assured that the glory and strength of a woman is in her weakness, and when she puts aside that armour she is lost. Think not that you have no mission—it is at a mother’s knee that empires have been lost and won, that generations have, and will be, cursed or blessed.”

I stood over her as I spoke; I was a tall man then and strong, and whether it was my speech or what I know not, but I felt the hand I held tremble in mine, and her eyes were turned from me.

“Let me say good-bye now,” I continued, “and thank you again for what you have done.”

She shook her head in deprecation.

“Very well, then, I will not recall it to you; but I can never forget—life is sweet of savour, and you gave it back to me. We will meet again in Paris—till then good-bye.”

“At the Louvre?” As she glanced up at me, trying to smile, I saw her eyes were moist with tears, and then—but the wide lands of Bidache were before me, and I held myself in somehow.

“Good-bye.”

“Good-bye.”

I turned, and without another look passed out of the hall. As I went down the stairway I saw on the terrace to my right the figure of d’Ayen. He had changed his costume to the slashed and puffed dress which earned for

the gay gentlemen of Henry's court the nickname of "Bigarrets," from M. de Savoye's caustic tongue, and his wizened face stood out of his snowy ruff in all the glow of its fresh paint. With one foot resting on the parapet, he was engaged in throwing crumbs to the peacocks that basked on the turf beneath him. I would have passed, but he called out.

"M. le Chevalier—a word."

"A word then only, sir, I am in haste."

"A bad thing, haste," he said, staring at me from head to foot; "these woods would fetch a good price, would they not?" and he waved his hand towards the wide-stretching forest.

"You mistake, M. d'Ayen, I am not a timber merchant."

"Oh! a good price," he went on, not heeding my reply. "M. le Chevalier, I was going to say I will have them down when I am master here. They obstruct the view."

I could have flung him from the terrace, but held myself in and turned on my heel.

"Adieu! Chevalier," he called out after me, "and remember what I have said."

I took no notice. The man was old, and his gibing tongue his only weapon. I ran down the steps to where Jacques was, ready for me with the horses. Springing into the saddle, I put spurs to the beast, and we dashed down the avenue, but as I did so I yielded to an impulse, and glanced up to the window—it was empty.

CHAPTER V.

A GOOD DEED COMES HOME TO ROOST.

WE dashed through the streets of Bidache, arousing the village dogs asleep in the yellow sunlight to a chorus of disapprobation. About a dozen sought to revenge their disturbed slumbers, and, following the horses, snapped viciously at their heels; but we soon distanced them, and flinging a curse or so after us, in dog language, they gave up the pursuit, and returned to blink away the afternoon. It was my intention to keep to the right of Ivry, and after crossing the Eure, head straight for Paris, which I would enter either by way of Versailles or St. Germain; it mattered little what road, and there was plenty of time to decide.

I have, however, to confess here to a weakness, and that was my disappointment that Madame had not stayed to see the last of me. Looking back upon it, I am perfectly aware that I had no right to have any feeling in the matter whatsoever; but let anyone who has been placed similarly to myself be asked to lay bare his heart—I would stake my peregrine, Etoile, to a hedge-crow on the result.

Madame knew I loved her. She must have seen the hunger in my eyes, as I watched her come and go, in the days when I lay at Ste. Geneviève, wounded to death. She must have felt the words I crushed down, I know not how, when we parted. She knew it all. Every

woman knows how a man stands towards her. I was going away. I might never see her again. It was little to have waved me Godspeed as I rode on my way, and yet that little was not given.

In this manner, like the fool I was, I rasped and fretted, easing my unhappy temper by letting the horse feel the rowels, and swearing at myself for a whining infant that wept for a slice of the moon.

For a league or so we galloped along the undulating ground which sloped towards the ford near Ezy; but as we began to approach the river, the country, studded with apple orchards, and trim with hedgerows of holly and hawthorn, broke into a wild and rugged moorland, intersected by ravines, whose depths were concealed by a tall undergrowth of Christ's Thorn and hornbeam, whilst beyond this, in russet, in sombre greens, and greys that faded into absolute blue, stretched the forests and woods of Anet and Croth-Sorel.

In the flood of the mellow sunlight the countless bells of heather enamelling the roadside were clothed in royal purple, and the brown tips of the bracken glistened like shafts of beaten gold. At times the track took its course over the edge of a steep bank, and here we slackened pace, picking our way over the crumbling earth, covered with grass, whose growth was choked by a network of twining cranesbill, gay with its crimson flowers, and listening to the dreamy humming of the restless bees, and the cheerful, if insistent, skirl of the grass crickets, from their snug retreats amidst the yarrow and sweet-scented thyme.

As we slid rather than rode down one of these banks, my horse cast a shoe, and this put a stop to any further hard riding until the mishap could be repaired.

"There is a smith at Ezy, monsieur," said Jacques, "where we can get what we want done, and then push on to Rouvres, where there is good accommodation at the *Grand Cerf*."

"I suppose Ezy can give us nothing in that way?"

"I doubt much, monsieur, for the place sank to nothing when Monseigneur the Duc d'Aumale was exiled, and the King, as monsieur is aware, has given the castle to Madame Gabrielle, for her son, little *César Monsieur*—the Duc de Vendôme."

"*Morbleu!* It is well that Madame de Beaufort has not set eyes on Auriac—eh, Jacques?" and I laughed as I saw the huge grey outlines of Anet rising in the foreground, and thought how secure my barren, stormbeaten rock was from the rapacity of the King's mistress.

Jacques came of a rugged race, and my words roused him.

"But M. le Chevalier would never let Auriac fall into the hands of the King or his Madame? We could man the tower with a hundred stout hearts and——"

"Swing on the gibbet at the castle gates in two weeks, Jacques. But remember, we are loyal subjects now, and are going to Paris to serve the King."

"As for me," answered Jacques, obstinately, "I serve my master, the Chevalier de Breuil d'Auriac, and none besides."

In this manner we jogged along, making but slow progress, and the sun was setting when we came in view of the willow-lined banks of the Eure, and entered the walnut groves of the outlying forest in which Ezy lay. As we approached we saw that the village was three parts deserted, and the ruined orchards and smokeless chimneys told their own tale. Turning a bend of the grass-

grown road we came upon a few children shaking walnuts from a tree, about two hundred paces from us, whilst a man and a woman stood hard by observing them. At the sight of us the woman turned to the man with an alarmed gesture, and he half drew a sword—we saw the white flash, and then, changing his mind, ran off into the forest. The children followed suit, sliding down the trunk of the tree, and fleeing into the brushwood, looking for all the world like little brown rabbits as they dashed into the gaps in the thorn.

As for the woman, she turned slowly and began to walk towards the village.

"They are very bashful here, Jacques," I said, quickening my pace.

"Except the lady, monsieur," and then we trotted up alongside her.

Reining in, I asked if she could direct me to the blacksmith's, for there seemed no sign of a forge about. She made no answer but stopped and stared at us through her hair, which fell in thick masses over her forehead and neck. As she did this I saw that she appeared to be of the superior peasant class, but evidently sunk in poverty. She was young, and her features so correct that with circumstances a little altered she would have been more than ordinarily good-looking. At present, however, the face was wan with privation, and there was a frightened look in her eyes. I repeated my question in as gentle a tone as I could command, and she found tongue.

"There is none here, monsieur; but at Anet you will find everything. That is the way, see!" and she pointed down a winding glade, lit up here and there with bars of sunlight until it faded into a dark tunnel of overarching

trees. I felt convinced from her tone and manner that she was trying to put us off, and Jacques burst in.

"Nonsense, my girl, I know there is a smith at Ezy, for but two days back one of Madame of Bidache's horses was shod here. You don't know your own village—try and think."

"There is none," she said shortly.

"Very well," said Jacques, "we won't trouble you further, and we will find out for ourselves. It will not be difficult."

We went on a pace or so, when she called out after us.

"Monsieur!"

"What is it?"

She stood twisting the ends of her apron between her fingers and then, suddenly,

"Monsieur, pardon, I will guide you."

"Oh! that is all very well," began Jacques; but I interrupted him, wondering a little to myself what this meant.

"Very well and thanks."

She dropped a courtesy, and then asked with a timid eagerness,

"Monsieur dees not come from the Blaisois?"

"*Ma foi!* No! This is hardly the way from the Orléannois; but lead on, please, it grows late."

She glanced up again, a suspicion in her eyes, and then without another word went on before us. We followed her down the winding grass-grown lane, past a few straggling cottages where not a soul was visible, and up through the narrow street, where the sight of us drove the few wretched inhabitants into their tumble-down houses, as if we had the plague itself at our saddle-bows. Finally

we stopped before a cottage of some pretensions to size; but decayed and worn, as all else was in this village, which seemed but half alive. Over the entrance to the cottage hung a faded signboard, marking that it was the local hostelry, and to the right was a small shed, apparently used as a workshop; and here the smith was, seated on a rough bench, gazing into space.

He rose at our approach and made as if he would be off; but his daughter, as the young woman turned out to be, gave him a sign to stay, and he halted, muttering something I could not catch; and as I looked at the gloomy figure of the man, and the musty inn, I said out aloud, "*Morbleu!* But it is well we have time to mend our trouble and make Rouvres; thanks, my girl, you might have told us at once instead of making all this fuss," and bending from the saddle I offered our guide a coin. She fairly snatched at it, and then, colouring up, turned and ran into the inn. I threw another coin to the smith and bade him set about shoeing the horse.

He shuffled this way and that, and then answered dully that he would do the job willingly, but it would take time—two hours.

"But it will be night by then," I expostulated, "and I have to go on; I cannot stay here."

"As monsieur chooses," answered the clod; "but, you see, I have nothing ready, and I am slow now; I cannot help it."

"This is a devil of a place," I exclaimed, resigning myself to circumstances, and, dismounting, handed the reins to Jacques. As I did so I heard voices from the inn, one apparently that of the girl, and the other that of a man, and it would seem that she was urging something; but what it was I could not catch, nor was I curious as

to the point of discussion; but it struck me that as we had to wait here two hours it would be well to inquire if I could get some refreshment for ourselves and a feed for the beasts. For answer to my question I got a gruff, "Go and ask my daughter," from the smith, who turned as he spoke and began to fumble with his tools. I felt my temper rising hotly, but stayed my arm, and bidding Jacques keep an eye on the horses, stepped towards the door of the inn. As I put my hand on it to press it open someone from within made an effort to keep it shut; but I was in no mood to be trifled with further, and, pushing back the door without further ceremony, stepped in. In doing so I thrust someone back a yard or so, and found that it was the girl who was trying to bar me out. Ashamed of the violence I had shown, I began to apologise, whilst she stood before me rubbing her elbow, and her face flushed and red. The room was bare and drear beyond description. There were a couple of rough tables, a chair or so, an iron pot simmering over a fire of green wood whose pungent odour filled the chamber. In a corner a man lay apparently asleep, a tattered cloak drawn over his features so as to entirely conceal them. I felt in a moment that this was the stranger who had fled on our approach, and that he was playing fox. Guessing there was more behind this than appeared, but not showing any suspicions in the least, I addressed the girl.

"I am truly sorry, and hope you are not hurt; had I known it was you I should have been gentler. I have but come to ask if I can get some wine for ourselves and food for the horses."

"It is nothing," she stammered, "I am not hurt.

There is but a little soup here, and for the horses—the grass that grows outside.”

“There is some wine there at any rate,” and I rested my eye on a horn cup, down whose side a red drop was trickling, and then let it fall on the still figure in the corner of the room. “There is no fear,” I continued, “you will be paid. I do not look like a gentleman of the road, I trust?”

She shrank back at my words, and it appeared as if a hand moved suddenly under the cloak of the man who lay feigning sleep in the room, and the quick movement was as if he had clutched the haft of a dagger. I was never a brawler or blusterer, and least of all did I wish to worry these poor people; but the times were such that a man's safety lay chiefly in himself, for the writ of the King ran weak in the outlying districts. The whole business, too, was so strange that I was determined to fathom it; and, unbuckling my sword, I placed it on a table so as to be ready on the instant, and then, seating myself on a stool beside it, said somewhat sharply,

“Enough, my girl; get me some wine and take out some to my servant. This will pay for it,” and I rang a fat crown piece on the table. “Hurry your father if you can, and I will be gone the moment my horse is shod.”

My tone was one not to be denied, and taking up the money she turned to a cupboard and with shaking fingers drew a bottle therefrom and placed it before me. Filling a cup I asked her to bear it out to Jacques, and then leaning back against the wall took a pull at my own goblet, and judge of my surprise when I found I was tasting nothing short of d'Arbois of the '92 vintage!

As I sipped my wine, and speculated how it came

there, the girl came back, and seeing that matters were as before began to attend to her cooking. Whatever she had said to the smith apparently had the effect of rousing him to greater activity, for through the open door I heard the puffing of his bellows, and very soon came the clang, clang of his hammer as he beat out a shoe.

It was getting dark now within the room, over which the flames of the fire occasionally blazed up and cast a fitful and uncertain light. Outside, however, there was a moon; and, in a few minutes at the most, my horse would be shod and I would have to continue my journey without having discovered what this little mystery meant. I could not help being a little amused at the manner in which my bashful friend, whose face was so well covered up, kept himself a prisoner in his corner. But at this moment the girl's cooking was finished, and the savoury odour of it was apparently more than he could endure, for he suddenly sprang to his feet exclaiming,

“*Nom du diable!* I am sick of this, and hungry as a wolf. Give me my supper, Marie, and if he wants to take me let him do so if he can; he will have to fight an old soldier first.”

As he spoke I distinctly saw his hand indicate me, and with an alarmed cry the girl sprang between us. It flashed upon me that my gentleman was, after all, only someone who was wanted, and that he regarded me with as much apprehension as I had regarded him with caution.

“Tush!” I said, “you good people make a great fuss over nothing. I certainly do not want to take you, my man, and neither you nor your little sweetheart here need be in the least alarmed.”

I had hardly finished speaking when he rushed forward.

"It is the Chevalier! It is Monsieur d'Auriac! Idiot, turkey, pig that I am to have kept my eyes shut and not recognised you. Monsieur, do you not know me—Nicholas—your sergeant, whom you saved from the rope?"

"Where you appear likely to go again, Nicholas; but what are you sulking about here for?" The wood in the fireplace blazed up as I spoke, and I saw Nicholas shift uneasily and look at the girl, who had moved to his side, and stood with her hands holding on to his cloak.

"This place was my home once, monsieur," he said bitterly, "and I have come back to it."

"I see you have, sergeant: but why in this way?"

"Monsieur, I was driven to straits and did a thing. Then they hunted me from Dreux to Rouvres, from Rouvres to Anet——"

"Where you appear to have made free with the duke's cellar, eh?"

"It is not so, monsieur," burst in the girl; "neither he nor we have done that. The wine you have drunk was a gift from madame the duchess."

There was truth in every line of her features, in the fierce little gesture with which she turned upon me in defence of her lover. I was sorry to let my tongue bite so hard, and said so, and went on with my inquiries.

"And from Anet you came here?"

"It is but a stone-throw," Nicholas answered, "and I had a business in hand. After which we were going away."

Whilst he was speaking Marie lit a lantern, and I saw that my ex-sergeant was evidently in the lowest water. He had been a smart soldier, but was now unkempt and dirty, and his eye had the shifty look of a hunted animal. He wore a rusty corselet and a rustier chain cap on his

head, drawn over a bandage that covered his ears. As my eye fell on the bandage I called to mind the mutilation that had been inflicted on him, a brand that had cast him out of the pale of all honest men. Nicholas watched my glance, and ground his teeth with rage.

"I will kill him," he hissed, "kill him like the dog he is. Monsieur, that was my business!"

"Then de Gomeron——"

"Is but an hour's ride away, monsieur—at Anet."

"At Anet! What does he do there?"

"Monsieur," he answered hoarsely, taking me by the sleeve of my doublet, "I know not; but a fortnight ago he came here with a score of lances at his back and the King's commission in his pocket, and he lords it as if he were the duke himself. Yesterday a great noble came up from the Blaisois, and another whose name I know not has come from Paris; and they hatch treason against the King. Monsieur, I can prove this. You saved my life once, and, beast as I am now, I am still grateful. Come with me. I will settle my score with him; and to-morrow you can bear news to the court that will make you a great man."

It was one of those moments that require instant decision. I was certainly not going to assist Nicholas in committing a murder. Any such plan of his could be easily stopped, but if what the man said was true, then he had given me information that might be of the greatest value to me. If it was false—well then, I should have a fool's errand for my pains, but be otherwise none the worse off. There was no time to question him in detail; for a second I was silent, and Marie looked from one to another of us with wide-open eyes.

"You have a horse?" I asked.

"Yes, monsieur. It is hidden in the forest not three hundred toises from here."

"We are ready, Monsieur le Chevalier," and Jacques' voice broke in upon us, Jacques himself standing in the doorway. My mind was made up that instant, and I decided to take the chance.

"Jacques," I said, "I have business here to-night, which must be done alone. Ride on therefore yourself to Rouvres and await me at the *Grand Cerf*. If anyone tries to hinder you, say that you ride for your master in the King's name. If I am not at Rouvres by morning, make your way to Septeuil. If I do not arrive in two days, go home and do the best you can for yourself. You follow?"

"Monsieur."

"Adieu, then; and Marie, here is something as a wedding portion for you," and I thrust a handful of gold pieces into her palm, and, being moved by many things, added: "When this is over, you and Nicholas go to Auriac. I will arrange for you there."

The girl stared blankly at me for a moment, then suddenly caught my hand and kissed it, and then with a rapid movement flung herself into her lover's arms.

"No," she said, "no; take back your gift, monsieur. He will not go."

"Nonsense, Marie," and Nicholas gently released her arms. "I have come back to you to mend my ways, and must begin by paying my debts. Come, monsieur."

CHAPTER VI.

"GREEN AS A JADE CUP."

WE passed the lacework of trees that bordered the skirts of the forest, Nicholas and I. On our left we could hear the drumming of a horse's hoofs growing fainter and more faint, as Jacques rode through the night to Rouvres. Marie's wailing came to us from behind, and Nicholas, who was walking doggedly along by the neck of my horse, stopped short suddenly and looked back. Turning in my saddle I looked back too, and there she was, in shadowy outline, at the ruined gates of the inn, and again her sobbing cry came to us.

"*Morbleu!*" I muttered to myself as I saw Nicholas' face twitch in the moonlight; "I must end this at once," and then sharply to my companion, "What stays you? Pick your heart up, man! One would think you go into the bottomless pit, you walk with so tender a foot!"

"I don't know what is in the bottomless pit, monsieur, and, like other fools, would probably go there on the run; but I do know the mercy of M. de Gomeron, and—I am not wont to be so, but my heart is as heavy as lead."

"Very well; then let us go back. It is like to be a fool's errand with such a guide."

My words, and the tone they were uttered in, touched him on the raw, and he swung round.

"I will go, monsieur; this way—to the right."

We turned sharply behind the silently waving arms of

a hedge of hornbeam, and it was a relief to find that this cut away all further chance of seeing the pitiful figure at the gates of the inn. Nicholas drew the folds of his frayed cloak over his head, as if to shut out all sound, and hurried onwards—a tall figure, lank and dark, that flitted before me within the shadow of the hedgerow. My horse's knees were hidden by the undergrowth on either side of the winding track, that twined and twisted like a snake under the tangle of grass and weed. This waste over which we passed, grey-green in the moonlight, and swaying in the wind, rolled like a heaving, sighing sea to where it was brought up abruptly by the dark mass of the forest, standing up solidly against the sky as though it were a high coast line. As we forced our way onwards, the swish of the grass was as the churning of water at the bows of a boat, and one could well imagine that the long, shaking splashes of white, mottling the moving surface before us, was caused by the breaking of uneasy water into foam. Of a truth these white splashes were but marguerites.

From the warm, dark depths at our feet myriads of grasshoppers shrilled to each other to be of good cheer, and ever and again we heard the sudden plunge and bustle of a startled hare, as it scuttered away in a mad fear at nothing.

"You count your toises long here, Nicholas," I remarked, for something to say, as we splattered in and out of a shallow pool; and the gnats, asleep on its surface, rose in a brown cloud, and hummed their anger about our ears.

"They are as we reckon them, monsieur. But a few steps further and we will get my horse; and after that

there is no difficulty, for I know each track and by-path of these woods."

"And I wager that many a fat buck has dropped here to your arquebus on moonlight nights such as this."

"One does not learn the forest for nothing, M. le Chevalier; but the bucks fell lawfully enough. My grandfather came here as huntsman to Madame Diane; my father succeeded him, and I had followed my father; but for the war——"

"And a smart soldier you made. I remember that when I cut you down from a nasty position I had not time then to hear how you came in such plight. How was it? Tell me the truth."

"I have almost forgotten how to do so. I will try, however, and make it short. When M. le Marquis bore you off after the duel and the escape of the prisoners, the Captain de Gomeron turned on me, and, damning me from head to toe, swore he would flay me to ribbons. Feeling sure he would do so, and careless of the consequences, I answered back—with the result you know. Marked as I was, it was useless to seek employment anywhere, and then I became what I am, and will end on the wheel."

"I don't think so," I said; but he interrupted,

"At anyrate not before I have paid my debt, and the bill presses."

I had purposely worked up to this.

"See here, sergeant," I said, "no nonsense. Brush off that bee you have on your head. You are here to-day to attend to my business, not your own. You say you are sick of your present life. Well, I have means to give you another chance, and I will do so; but I repeat again 'no nonsense.' You understand?"

He stood silently for a moment, looking this way and that. We were within a yard or so of the forest, and its shadow covered him, all but his face, which was turned to me, drawn and white. He was struggling against old habits of absolute obedience, and they won.

"I understand, M. le Chevalier."

"Very well, then, go on, and remember what I have said."

He turned and stepped forwards; "This way, and mind the branches overhead," and we entered the forest, my horse leaping a shallow ditch that separated it from the grass land. We took a soft turf-covered path, overhung by branches, and went on for about fifty paces before coming to a halt, which we did in a small irregular patch of trees that lay in the full flood of the moonlight. In the darkness beyond I heard the gentle murmur of a small spring, and then the distinct movement of a heavy body and the clink of iron. My hand reached to my holster in a flash, but Nicholas saw the gesture, and said, "It is the horse. A moment, monsieur," and lifting up the curtain of leaves beside him, from which, as he did so, the dew fell in a soft shower, he dived into the thicket, to reappear again leading the long black length of his horse. It struck me at once that the beast was of uncommon size, and this, and the white star on its forehead, brought to my mind the recollection of de Rône's great English charger, Couronne.

"*Harnibleu!*" I burst out; "you seem to be in the lowest water, and here you have a horse worth a hundred pistoles at the least!"

"Did you see her by daylight, monsieur, you would know that twice a hundred pistoles would not purchase

her. Do you not know her, M. le Chevalier? This is Couronne, M. de Rône's charger!"

"Couronne! I thought so. And how the devil do you come by her?"

"Her reins were in the wind when I caught her; a fair prize of war, and M. de Rône will never need her more. Since I got her she has saved me twice, and if I can help it we shall never part."

He stroked the mare's sleek neck, wet and glistening with the dew, and, quickly mounting, swung her round to the bit and laid her beside me. It was not the time for talk, and we drew out of the clearing in single file, and, after forcing our way through the wet and shining leaves around us, found a bridle-path. Along this my guide went at a trot. On either side of us the silent tree-trunks stretched to an infinite distance in gloomy colonnades. Overhead, the boughs swayed and shook sadly; below, the dry leaves hissed and crackled. Once, when we had slackened pace for a moment, the sullen groaning of an old and very savage boar came to us, and we heard him grinding his tusks in his lair of juniper. At another time we surprised a number of deer in an open glade, and, startled by our sudden appearance, they dashed off with a wild rush into the forest, and then all was still. Beyond the glade the roadway widened, so that two might keep abreast, and down this we went at a gallop, to find ourselves once more in the endless aisles of the forest, passing through a ghostly light that barely enabled the horses to pick their way in and out amongst the huge moss-grown trees standing in measureless numbers around us, and where each pace took them fetlock-deep into the carpet of wet and withered leaves. Amidst the creaking of the boughs overhead, and the churn of the leaves at

our feet, we rode on, nose to tail, Nicholas leading the way with unerring certainty. What his thoughts were, I knew not; but as I looked at the square outlines of the figure before me I could not but feel pity for this man, reduced to such a condition. True, the life of a common soldier was not such as to make a man squeamish about many things, but the ex-sergeant had always struck me as being a man of a different stamp to the generality of his fellows, and it was a thousand pities to see him forced to be a rogue; de Gomeron had truly much to answer for. But if I could I would mend this matter.

I had done too little good in the world to neglect the opportunity that seemed to present itself to me, so as we went on I weaved a little plan to give the man another start in life. I had already a rough idea when I parted with those gold pieces to Marie, but pulled all the threads together as we rode along, fully resolving to give my plan effect as soon as the business I had in hand was done. And of this business I could not hope much. We were going straight into the lion's mouth, as it were, for, whether de Gomeron held the King's commission or not, he had twenty lances at his back at Anet; and who on earth would question him if a crop-eared thief and his companion were slain. Besides, even if we were not discovered, I could see no way of laying hold of the tail of the conspiracy by floundering through a measureless forest at night, and finally skulking round the castle like a homeless cat. I half began to repent me of the whole affair, and to wish that I had tossed the venture up and down a trifle more in my mind before I embarked upon it. At the worst, however, perhaps it meant nothing more than a night in the forest, and, the next day, a tired horse and man. On the other hand, there was, or rather is, such a

thing as luck in the world, and did I make a discovery of any consequence my hand would be much stronger. Perchance, indeed, I might be assured of success, and then—other things might happen. Whilst I was thus ruminating, Nicholas suddenly pulled up, and held out a warning hand.

"What is it?" I asked in a low tone.

"*Hist!*" he said, and then in a rapid whisper, "another fifty yards and we come to the open. Anet lies before us, and the rest of the way must be done on foot."

"And the horses?"

"Fasten them here. You have a picketing rope?"

"Yes—round the neck of the horse."

"Good; I had not noticed it before, and was half afraid you had none, monsieur."

The horses were soon securely fastened, and, when this was done, Nicholas spoke low and earnestly: "Should we be discovered, monsieur, there is no use making a standing fight. The odds are too many. When we come to the open I will show you a withered oak. This is exactly opposite where the horses are—in this direction. If we are pursued, make for the forest, and lie down. The chances are they will pass us by. Then to the horses and follow me. If I go down—ride northwards for your life."

"How the devil am I to find my way through the trees?"

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders as if to say "That was my affair."

We had gone too far to go back, however, and placing my pistols in my belt, and loosening my sword in its sheath, I followed Nicholas with cautious footsteps. As he said, in about fifty yards we came to the open, and

halted close to a huge oak, bald of all leaves, with its gnarled trunk riven and scarred by lightning. Before us a level stretch of turf sloped gently down towards what was once an ornamental lake, but now overgrown with the rankest weeds. In the centre of the lake was a small island, on which was set a summer-house, fashioned like a Moorish kiosque, and beyond this arose, huge and square, the enormous façade of the château. It was in darkness except for an oriel window above a long terrace on the east wing, which was bright with light, and in the courtyard below there was evidently a fire. Men were singing around it, and a lilting chorus came to our ears.

Nicholas pointed to the window, then looked at the priming of his wheel-lock pistol and whispered hoarsely, "We must keep in the shadow, monsieur. Stay—this is the tree; you cannot mistake it, and now come on. Be careful not to trip or stumble, and, above all, do not cough."

No worse warning than the latter could have been given to me, and I all but choked myself in my efforts to restrain an almost uncontrollable desire either to sneeze or cough. Luckily, I managed to hold myself in. Inch by inch we crept onwards, keeping well in the shadow, and edging our way round the frills of the forest. I could hear Nicholas breathing hard, and from time to time he stopped to rest; but I was a glad man to find I was not winded, and that therefore I must be truly as strong again as ever I was. At last, by dint of creeping, crawling, and wriggling along, we worked our way to within twenty paces of the terrace, above which the stained glass of the oriel window glowed with light. Here we came to a stop and watched. Sometimes we saw a shadow moving backwards and forwards in the light of the window, then the

shadow was joined by another, and both stopped, as if the two men to whom they belonged were in earnest converse. The merriment from the courtyard was unceasing, and whatever may have been the dark plots weaving upstairs, below there was nothing but the can and the catch.

"We must get to the window," I whispered with an inquiring look.

"By the terrace," said Nicholas in answer, and as he spoke there came to us the faint but distinct sound of a horn, apparently from the very depths of the forest, and the notes roused a brace of hounds in the courtyard, who bayed into the night. Nicholas gripped my arm, and I turned to him in surprise. His face was pale, he was shaking all over like an aspen, and his black eyes were dilated with fear.

"Did you hear that, monsieur?" he said thickly.

"*Diable!* What? I hear three different things—dogs, men, and someone blowing a horn."

"Then you did hear it—the horn?"

"Yes. What of it? No doubt a post on its way to Anet."

"No post ever rang that blast, monsieur. That is the Wild Huntsman, and the blast means death."

As he spoke it came again, wild and shrill with an eerie flourish, the like of which I had never heard before. The dogs seemed to go mad with the sound, there was a hubbub in the courtyard, and someone in the chamber above the terrace threw open the sash and peered out into the night. I thought at first it was de Gomeron; but the voice was not his, for, after looking for a moment, he gave a quick order to the men below and stepped in again. As for Nicholas, he seemed beside himself, and I had to hold him by main force by my side, or he would have broken and fled.

“*Diablo!*” I said, “sit still, fool—see, there are a couple of horsemen gone in search of your Wild Huntsman, who has been so nearly spoiling our soup. They will occupy him at anyrate—sit still.”

The men rode by us slowly, one of them carrying a torch, and, turning to the right, trotted off into the forest, cursing the orders they had received to go forth after the horn-winder. As they passed, I began to breathe more freely, for had they gone to the left it was an even chance that they would have discovered our horses, owing to one of the beasts neighing, a danger always to be guarded against in an ambuscade. In a minute or so Nicholas, too, began to get more composed, and seeing this I determined to prick him into anger, for then he would fear nothing.

“Pull up, man,” I said; “your ears lie beyond that pane of glass. Do you not want them back?”

He put his hand up to the side of his head with a muttered curse, to which de Gomeron’s name was linked, and I saw that he was better.

“Now,” I whispered, “for the window.”

“We must get to the terrace,” he answered. “From there it might be done.” And with a hurried look behind him, at which I began to laugh in a low tone of mockery, he crawled forward rapidly. I followed with equal speed and caution, and in a half minute we had gained the shadow of the terrace, and, working along its ivy-covered wall, got to the main building. Here we cast about for some means to get up. It was not possible to do this by holding on to the ivy, as if it came away there would be a fall and all our fat would be in the fire. The ascent had to be made noiselessly, and, as I looked at the high wall before us, I began to think it was impos-

sible. Running my eye over the lichen-grey face of the main building, however, I noticed something that looked like a series of huge monograms, with a crescent above each, cut in high relief on the stones, beginning about ten feet from the ground.

"We might get up that way," I whispered.

Nicholas nodded, with a pale face. In his excitement he had forgotten the Wild Huntsman, much to my satisfaction.

"Bend then, and I will ascend from your back."

He leaned forwards against the wall, and climbing on to his shoulders, I found that I might possibly raise myself by the monograms, which I discovered to be the letters H. D. interlaced in one another, the initials of the second Henry and Diane de Poitiers; and the crescent was, as is well-known, Madame Diane's crest. Taking a long breath, I lifted myself slowly—there was but an inch or so to hold on to—and at last found a crevice in which I could just put the point of my boot. This was enough for me to change my hold to the next higher monogram, and finally I came to a level with the parapet of the terrace. Here there was a difficulty. Every time I stretched my hand out to grasp the parapet I found that I could not reach over, and that my fingers slipped off from the slime and moss on the stones. Three times I made the attempt, and swung back three times, until I began to feel that the effort was beyond me. There was, however, one chance, and quietly thrusting my boot forward, I began to feel amidst the ivy for a possible foothold, and, to my delight, found it rest at once on a small projecting ledge that ran round the terrace. The remainder of my task was easy, and the next moment I found myself lying flat on my face beneath the oriel window.

Here I paused to recover myself, peering down at Nicholas, who was making an attempt to raise himself by his hands to reach the monograms and climb to me. "Steady," I whispered, "and catch this." Rapidly unwinding a silken sash I wore round my waist, in the fashion I had learned when serving in Spain, I dropped one end towards him, and after an effort or two he managed to seize it. Then I looped a fold of the silk round a buttress of the parapet, and, holding on to the other end, told Nicholas to climb, and as the sash tightened suddenly, I cast up a prayer that it might not break. It was, however, of Eastern make, and one may have hung a bombard to it with safety. I heard Nicholas breathing hard, and once or twice the ivy rustled more than it ought to have, but at last his head appeared over the parapet and he too was beside me. A moment after we saw the flash of a torch in the forest and heard the voices of the men who had gone forth returning, and then three instead of two horsemen appeared, riding towards the main entrance.

"There, Nicholas, is your Wild Huntsman. Are you satisfied now?"

And he hung his head like a great dog that has been detected in something wrong.

"Now for the window," I said. "I will rise slowly and find out what I can. You keep your pistol ready and your eyes open. Do not rise, and remember my orders."

"There is a broken pane to the left; it is half-hidden by the curtain. You can hear and see from there."

As he said this I rose softly to my feet, and finding the broken pane without any difficulty, peered in.

The room was bright with the light of candles, and

at a table covered with papers were seated two men, whilst a third was standing and pointing with his fingers at a scroll. In the man with his back to me I had no difficulty in recognising de Gomeron. The one looking towards me was assuredly Biron, for his was a face that once seen could never be forgotten. As for the man who was standing beside him, I knew him not, though subsequently—but I anticipate.

Biron was evidently in a high state of excitement. He was biting at the end of his dark moustache, and the fingers of his hand were playing nervously with the star on his breast, whilst his shifty, treacherous eyes were turning now on de Gomeron, now on the figure standing at his elbow. He seemed to be hesitating, and I heard de Gomeron say:

"This is my price—not money, not land, not a title, but only a few words. You have each one, my lord, your share of the spoils, set down in writing. I do not want so much even. All I ask is your word of honour to favour my suit with the King. For me the word of Biron is enough, and I know his Majesty can refuse you nothing."

"My God!" exclaimed Biron, and writhed in his chair.

"The Marshal might give me the promise I seek, Lafin," and de Gomeron turned to the man who was standing at Biron's elbow. "The word will give me a wife—not much of a reward."

"And the lands of Bidache and Pelouse, eh?"

I almost fell forwards in my eagerness to hear, and only checked myself in time.

"Exactly," sneered de Gomeron. "Do you think I have risked my life for the good of my health? See here, Chevalier," and he bent forward and whispered a

word or so that made the other pale, and then de Gomeron leaned back in his chair and smiled. Biron did not apparently see or hear. His forehead was resting on his clasped hand, and he seemed to be revolving the hazard of some great step. As for me, I thought I caught the words, "your instant help," followed by "lances" and "power," and guessed—I was not wrong—that the captain had forced Lafin's hand.

"My dear de Gomeron," he said, "the Marshal is willing enough, but you know the common talk, that the King has other views for Madame, and that M. d'Ayen——" But Biron interposed:

"M. de Gomeron, you ask too much. Madame de la Bidache is of the first nobility. Tremouille was my friend. It is too much."

"And I give Monseigneur a crown."

"*Peste!* My lord, after all M. de Gomeron has deserved his price, and a good sword and a better head must not be thrown away. Remember, monseigneur, an open hand makes faithful hearts," said Lafin.

"But the King would never consent," began Biron.

"Give me your word to help me, monseigneur. I will do the rest for myself."

"Give it, my lord."

Biron hesitated for a moment, and then suddenly threw up his hands. "Very well, let it be as you wish. I promise, M. de Gomeron."

"Enough, my lord; I thank you. The Chevalier Lafin has laid before you in detail all our resources. Let me now show you this." He unrolled a parchment that was before him, and handed it to the Marshal. "Here," he added, "are the signatures of all. It only needs that of Biron; now sign."

I could hear the beating of my heart in the silence that followed, and then Biron said hoarsely, "No! no! I will never put my name to paper."

"*Morbleu!* Marshal," burst out Lafin, "This is no time for nibbling at a cherry. Tremouille and Epernon have signed. Put your seal to the scroll, and the day it reaches M. de Savoye, thirty thousand troops are across the frontier, and you will change the cabbage gardens of Biron for the coronet of Burgundy and La Breese."

"And see your head on a crown piece, Marshal," added de Gomeron.

"But we have not heard, Lafin—" began the Marshal.

"We will hear to-night, monseigneur—that horn meant news, and Zamet never fails. Curse the low-bred Italian! *Pardieu!* he is here," and as he spoke, I heard what seemed to be three distinct knocks at a carved door, and, Lafin opening it, a man booted and spurred entered the room. He was splashed with mud as one who had ridden fast and far.

"Zamet!" exclaimed the Marshal and de Gomeron, both rising, and the face of the former was pale as death.

"Good evening, gentlemen! *Maledetto!* But I have had a devil of a ride, and some fool kept winding a will-o'-the-wisp kind of horn that led me a fine dance. It was lucky I met your men."

"Then that blast we heard was not yours?"

"*Corpo di Bacco!* No, Chevalier."

I was a glad man to think that Nicholas, who was crouching at my feet, did not hear this, or there might have been a catastrophe, but that indeed was not long delayed.

"Well, friends, you all seem to have pale faces—would

you not like to hear the news? I have ridden post to tell you."

There was no answer, and the Italian continued: "I suppose I must give it, make your minds easy. It is all over—she died last night. We are free at anyrate from the enmity of Gabrielle—she knew too much."

"Did it hurt her?" asked Biron nervously.

"I don't know," answered Zamet brutally, "I have never tasted the Borgia citron myself."

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed the Marshal, springing to his feet, "this is too terrible," and he began to pace up and down, whilst the other three remained in whispered converse, their eyes now and again turning to Biron, who walked the room like a caged beast. Nicholas had risen slowly to his feet despite my orders, and was looking over my shoulders with a white face and blazing eyes. I dared not tell him to go back; but, with a warning look at him, strained my ears to catch what was being said, but could hear nothing, until at length Zamet raised his voice: "Have done with it, Marshal, and sign. After all, Madame de Beaufort was no more than a ———," and he used a foul word. "The King is prostrate now; but in a week Gabrielle will be forgotten, and then anything might happen. He is beginning to recover. He already writes verses on the lost one," he went on with a grin, "*charmante* Gabrielle—*diavolo!* but you should have seen her as she lay dead—she was green as a jade cup."

"Be still, dog," and Biron turned fiercely on him. The Italian stepped back, his hand on his dagger; but in a moment he recovered himself. His black eyebrows lifted, and his upper lip drew back over his teeth in a sneer.

"I did not know Monseigneur would be so affected;

but time presses and we need the name of Biron to that scroll. Hand the Marshal the pen, Lafin."

"It is here," and de Gomeron, dipping a pen in a silver inkstand, held it out in his hand.

Biron made a half step forward to take it, when a thing happened. I felt myself suddenly thrust aside, and there was a blinding flash, a loud report, and a shout from Nicholas, "Missed, by God!"

There was absolutely no time to do anything but make for the horses. Nicholas had fired at de Gomeron in his mad thirst for revenge, and had practically given our lives away. In the uproar and din that followed we slid down the sash like apes, and dashed towards the horses. Someone shouted "Traitor—traitor," and let fly at us twice as we ran across the open space. From the courtyard we could hear the hurry and bustle of men suddenly aroused, and as we reached the oak we heard the bay of the bloodhounds, and the thunder of hoofs in pursuit.

CHAPTER VII.

POOR NICHOLAS!

FROM the oak to the spot where our horses were tethered was close upon fifty paces, and never, I think, was ground covered at a speedier rate by men running for their lives. I was bursting with anger, and know not what restrained me from pistolling Nicholas, so furious was I at the blind folly of the man. As we reached the horses, we could hear the dogs splashing through the spill-water at the edge of the lake, and someone fired a third shot at us from horseback—a shot in the dark which whistled through the branches overhead.

“Quick! quick, monsieur!” gasped Nicholas, and with a turn of his hand he freed Couronne, and sprang to her back—the great mare standing steady as a rock.

“Quick!” he called out again more loudly, and I made a vain effort to loosen my beast, which, startled by the shots, the baying of the dogs, and our haste and hurry, plunged and kicked as though it were demented.

“Damn you!” I hissed, half at the horse, half at the crop-eared idiot who had caused this disaster, and, managing somehow to scramble to the saddle, cut the halter with a draw of my dagger. At this moment the dogs reached us; a dark object sprang up from the ground, and, fastening on the jaws of my horse, brought him to his knees, whilst the other beast flew at my companion. Nicholas’ pistol rang out to no purpose, the report was

echoed by a chorus of shouts from the troopers following us, and Couronne, swinging round, lashed out with her heels at the hound that was baying her. Leaning forward with one arm half round the neck of my snorting horse, I thrust twice at the hound hanging to him, the first time sliding off his metal collar, but at the second blow my blade slipped to the hilt into something soft, it seemed of its own accord, and as the dead dog fell suddenly back, bearing my poniard with it, my freed horse rose to its feet, and mad with pain dashed forwards into the teeth of our pursuers. I let him go—one might as well have tried to stop the rush of a mad bull. By a miracle I escaped being torn off by the overhanging branches, and as we raced into the open, Nicholas at my heels shouting “To the north! to the north!” we were not twenty paces away from the troopers. My frantic horse went straight at them, and, driving my spurs home, I made him leap at the foremost horseman. His animal swerved off—a piece of good luck for both of us. Then my pistol missed fire, and I was in the midst of them. The quarters were so close, and the confusion so great, that at first only those on the outside could use their weapons, and in their hurry to do so some of these perhaps struck at each other. One man, however, shortened his sword, and would have run me through had I not luckily seen the flash of the blade and given him the heavy iron-bound butt of my pistol on the forehead. He was probably much hurt, but although he lurched backwards senseless, so close was the press that he was held in his saddle. The butt of the pistol was broken off by the blow, and for the moment I was disarmed. I dared not call out to Nicholas for fear of being recognised; but at this juncture horse and man on my right seemed to be

dashed to earth, and Nicholas was at my elbow, striking right and left with the heavy hilt of his sword. Profiting by the relief, I drew out my second pistol and shot the man before me. Pressing against his mount with my brave little nag, who was now in hand again, I got clear, and, with a shout to Nicholas to follow, dashed off towards the north. It was at this moment that three other riders galloped up, and I heard de Gomeron call out, "*Sangdieu!* They are off. After them, dogs," and clapping spurs to his beast he rode after us. We had, however, gained a full twenty yards' start, which was more than trebled by the few seconds' delay before the troopers could recover themselves and follow. My horse was going at racing pace; but Couronne kept by his side with a long and effortless stride. De Gomeron was at our heels, and with a sudden rush ranged alongside of Nicholas. The sergeant possibly did not recognise his assailant, and managed somehow to parry the cut aimed at him, and the next moment de Gomeron's horse stumbled and went down; but the man himself, who was a rare horseman, fell on his feet like a cat. It was, however, a moment more of respite, and Nicholas, with a wild cheer, dashed into the forest, riding recklessly through the trees. We both leaned forward to the necks of our horses, and as far as I was concerned I made no attempt to guide my beast, but let him follow Couronne, who, surefooted as a stag, turned and twisted amongst the trees with almost human forethought. The single hound that was left strained bravely behind us; but, mindful probably of the fate that had overtaken his brother, made no direct attack. As we dashed into the wood the troopers attempted to follow; but it was with a relaxed speed, and every moment we were distancing them, and their cries,

shouts, and curses became fainter and more faint. I began to think if we could but be rid of the sleuthhound, we would get off with whole skins. The beast was, however, not to be shaken off, and, avoiding the heels of the horses, came with a *lop, lop*, through the leaves alongside my nag, just out of reach of the point of my sword, which I had managed to draw. As he snapped and growled, my horse, already once wounded, and still smarting with pain, shied off from him, bruising my leg against a tree trunk, in the bark of which my spur remained, and all but unseating me. Another shy amongst the trees would have finished my business, for the pain of the bruise at the moment was exquisite; but, leaping a fallen log, Nicholas burst through a juniper bush, and my horse following him, we came on to an open stretch which sloped down to the river.

“*Ouf!* Out of it at last!” I gasped out to Nicholas.

“It’s a mile yet to the river, monsieur,” he answered, slackening pace slightly to allow me to get alongside of him.

The dog, however, was not yet shaken off, and kept steadily beside my horse. In the bright moon I could see him running freely and easily; and, much as I cursed his presence there, I could not help but admire the gallant beast. He seemed to know perfectly the danger that lay in the long shining sword, that thrust out at him like a snake’s tongue whenever he came too near.

I, however, owed him one for the bruise, and it was not a time to waste in admiring things. So I called to Nicholas.

“Slacken pace a little more. I want to be rid of the dog.”

“We can kill him in the river,” answered the sergeant.

"Better stop him here," and Nicholas obeyed.

Seeing us slacken, the hound tried to head the horses. This was exactly what I wanted; and shortening the reins, I pulled round my nag suddenly, right upon the dog, and, stooping low, gave him a couple of inches in the quarters as he attempted to double. It was not a wound that would kill. I had no intention, unless forced to, of doing that; but it had the desired effect, and he fled back howling with pain.

"Adieu, monsieur!" I cried out after him with a laugh, and joining the sergeant we cantered on through the clearing towards the river.

The ill-will I felt towards Nicholas had gone by this time. He had borne himself like a brave man, as he was; and, after all, if I had been in his position I would perhaps have done the same, and let drive at de Gomeron at sight. My little nag, however, at this time began to show signs of distress, and I turned my attention from the sergeant to husbanding the poor beast's strength—patting him on his foam-covered neck to encourage him, and speaking to him in the manner that horses love. *Pardieu!* If men only knew it, there are moments when a touch of the hand and a kind word are better than four-inch spurs.

We came to a narrow patch now, and rode down this, the river being in sight, winding like a silver ribbon thrown carelessly down. On the opposite bank it was overhung with willows, whose drooping boughs swung low to the very surface of the water. Here and there the stump of a felled tree stood up like a sentinel. In the distance, behind us, we could hear one or two of the troopers, who had by this time managed to get through the wood, yelling and shouting as they urged their horses

towards the river. Doubtless more would soon follow, and I cursed them loudly and heartily. Nicholas looked back.

"But fifteen yards of a swim, monsieur, and we are safe."

"Not exactly. See there?"

The sergeant followed my outstretched blade, and swore too. Right before us two men galloped out of a strip of coppice that stretched to the water's edge and cut us off from the stream.

"*Sacrebleu!* How did they know that cut? Have at them, monsieur."

And we did.

It had to be a matter of moments only. The troopers behind were coming on, and, if once they reached us, we could not well hope to escape again; the odds were too many. I did not, therefore, waste time, but went straight for my man, and, to do him justice, he seemed nothing loath to meet me. He cut over the shoulder, and, receiving this on my forte, I gave him the point in the centre of his breastplate, making it ring like a bell. Only a Milanese corselet could have saved him as it did. My nag went on, but turned on its haunches to the reins, and before he could well recover himself I was at him again, and discovered that he wore a demi-mask on his face.

"Monsieur, shall I prick your mask off before killing you?" I mocked, suiting the words to a thrust that all but effected the object, and ripped him on the cheek.

He was a good swordsman, but this made him beside himself with passion, and this frantic state, and the sound of his voice as he kept cursing me, told me that my opponent was none other than Biron himself. Now came

a serious difficulty, which I had to consider like lightning. Did I kill him, and he was an infant in my hands, there could be no hope for me—he was too great—too highly placed for me to have any chance if I compassed his death. Therefore, as I pressed him, I called out loud enough for him to hear, “Marshal, you are mad—go back—you are known to me.”

He thrust at me for answer; but I could stand no more nonsense, and, getting within his guard, struck him off his horse with a blow from the hilt of my sword, and, wasting not a second more on him, turned to the assistance of Nicholas.

It was much needed, for the sergeant's opponent was none other than de Gomeron himself, who had remounted after his fall, and, by cutting off a corner, intercepted us, almost with complete success. How Nicholas held his own against this finished swordsman for even so long a period as a half-minute I am unable to say. It was doubtless due to the strength of his bitter hatred, and his fury for revenge. Even as it was, I was too late. As I dashed towards him, Nicholas fairly screamed out:

“Leave him to me—he is—a—ah!”

He never finished, for de Gomeron saw his chance and passed his sword through the sergeant's throat, and he fell limply from Couronne a dead man.

Before, however, the free-lance could recover himself I was on him, and, standing in my stirrups, cut at him with the full swing of my sword. He parried like lightning, but the force of the blow beat down his guard, and although my blade fell flat upon his steel cap, he went down like an ox.

Poor Nicholas was gone! I knew that thrust, and once received there was nothing for it but masses for the

soul. A half-dozen troopers were not two hundred yards away, and life lay on the other side of the Eure. I went straight on, and jumped my horse into the stream. It was running high and deep, and as I fell into the water with a splash and hiss of white foam around me, I heard another heavy plunge close to my shoulder, and, in the glance I cast towards the sound, saw that it was the now riderless Couronne, who had followed her companion of the night. To ease the horse, I slipped from the saddle, and, hanging on to the pommel, was towed along by him as the good beast breasted the stream bravely. *Pardieu!* How the yellow water grumbled and foamed and bubbled around us. The current set towards the opposite bank, and the force of it carried us down, it seemed in a moment, fully fifty yards from the spot where we had plunged in, to within a few feet of the opposite shore. Here, however, the river ran strong and swiftly, the bank was high, and the horses could make no headway, but kept drifting down. By this time the troopers had reached the scene of the fight, and I could hear them howling with anger as they gathered around their fallen leaders, and, without a head to guide them, hesitated what to do, each moment of delay giving me precious time, and bringing me closer to a shelving bank a few yards to the left. Not one of the troopers dared the stream, and they had apparently emptied their arquebuses after us in pursuit, for none fired, although they called to each other, "Shoot him down—shoot him down!"

A couple of men galloped down stream a little below me, and, dismounting, began to load hurriedly, it being evidently their intention to pick me off as I drifted past. For the moment I gave myself up for lost; but, determining to make a last effort to save myself, made a snatch at the

willows that overhung the bank and brushed us with their wet and dripping leaves as we struggled underneath. As I did this, I loosed my hold of the saddle, and the horses slid past me, and I was dragged by the current right into the bank. The willows were tough, and I held on to them like a leech, and the troopers, who had seen what I was about, began to laugh at me, and adjure me to hold on tight as they would be ready to shoot in a moment. The fools! They gave me the moment's time I wanted, and, digging my boot into the soft bank, I laid hold of the stem of a willow and with an effort reached the shore. I rolled over at full length, and then lay flat on my face, whilst the troopers with many curses ran forward a few feet and let off their arquebuses, on the off chance of bringing me down. They aimed truly enough, and had I not lain to earth as I did, I should infallibly have been killed, for the bullets whizzed past, it seemed, but a few inches above me. I let out a yell as if I was mortally hurt, and then rising, ran down stream behind the willows as fast as my bruised leg would allow me, to see if I could not get back one or both the horses. My stratagem had the desired effect, for on my cry of "I am dead—I am dead," two others of the men who had run up let off their pieces where I was supposed to be, and they all shouted, "We have him; he is down."

"*Morbleu!* Not yet," I could hardly refrain from chuckling to myself, as I hobbled along the bank, and to my joy saw them in a little bay, about a hundred paces from me, moving slowly in the shallow water, one behind the other, towards the land. A spur had been thrown out here, evidently with the object of protecting the bank, and it had cast the main stream on the opposite shore, and given the beasts a chance of landing.

I felt my leg at each step I took; but went on at a round pace somehow, and came up to Couronne just as she was stepping out of the water. Catching her by the bridle, I mounted, although with some difficulty, and slipping my hands through the reins of my own nag, trotted off under cover of the trees, leaving M. de Gomeron, who had doubtless recovered by this time, and his men to make a target of the darkness. I had come through somehow, but I was sick and sore at heart, as I urged Couronne from a trot to a gallop, when I thought of poor Nicholas lying dead by the banks of the Eure.

CHAPTER VIII.

MONSIEUR DE PREAULX.

I KEPT off the road as far as possible to avoid being tracked. Even if no further attempt to follow me was made to-night, which was uncertain, as de Gomeron was not the man to let the barest chance slip through his fingers, yet there was no doubt as to what would happen on the morrow. I congratulated myself on having crippled the last of the sleuthhounds, as my gentlemen would be placed thereby in a difficulty in regard to my route, and if they scoured the country in twos and threes, I felt confident of being able, with Jacques' aid, to give a good account of myself did we meet, despite my bruised leg, which reminded me of itself unpleasantly.

As I patted Couronne's neck I thought of Nicholas, and with the memory of him the face of Marie came up. I felt myself in a measure responsible for his death, and was resolved to weigh out in full to Marie the payment I had promised them both. It was a debt I would discharge to the end of the measure.

A sense of relief came to my mind with this resolve, and, as Rouvres could not be far distant, I slackened pace to let the horses breathe a trifle, and began to hastily plan my future course of action on reaching Paris. I had not only discovered what was evidently a deep and widely-spread plot, but had also stumbled on the dreadful secret of the death of the woman who was to be Queen of

France in name, as she was in reality. It was certain that she had been foully murdered. It was certain that the King's most trusted captain and many of his greatest nobles were hilt-deep in treachery—so much I knew. I had seen with mine own eyes, and heard with mine own ears, but beyond this I had no proofs—and what would my word weigh against theirs! Besides this there was my own trouble. D'Ayen's mocking warning was explicit enough when read with Palin's confidence, and any doubt I may have had on that point was almost set at rest by what I had overheard. In short, I was the rival of the King, and felt my head very loose upon my neck.

What was I to do? It was no easy matter to decide; but I came to the conclusion that my best course was to seek out the all-powerful Sully, tell him what I knew, and beg the help of that great man. I did not know him, except by repute; but my case was strong and my cause good. I would delay not a moment about this on reaching Paris; but it was Rouvres I had to come to first, and many a league lay for reflection between me and the Louvre.

So I jogged on, not quite certain of my way, and every now and again making a cast to find the road, for by riding parallel with it I knew I must reach my destination. Once, however, I lost myself for about an hour, and, on finding the road again, resolved to keep to it for the remainder of my journey, as the moon was rapidly waning, and that darkness which touches the edge of the morning was at hand.

At last I heard the Lauds chime solemnly out into the night, and in a few minutes pulled up the weary beasts before the gates of Rouvres. Here I found a difficulty I might have anticipated. The gates were shut,

and the unpleasant prospect of a dreary wait of some hours lay before me. This was not to be borne, and I raised a clamour that might have awakened the dead. It had the desired effect of rousing the watch at the gate; a wicket was opened, the light of a lanthorn flashed through, and a gruff voice bade me begone.

"Open," I roared, "open in the King's name."

"*Pardieu!* Monsieur, the gates are kept shut in the King's name, and his Majesty does not like his subjects' rest being disturbed," answered another voice, and from its tone and inflection I guessed it was that of an officer.

"In that case, monsieur," I said, "let me in so that we may both go to our beds, and a thousand apologies for disturbing you. My servant is already at the *Grand Cerf*, and one man cannot take Rouvres."

"Then you are that M. de Preaulx of the Anjoumois, whose lackey Jacques Bisson arrived last night—for it is morning now?"

"You keep good watch, monsieur—who else should I be?" I said, with an inward "thank heaven" at the accident that had discovered to me my new name.

There was no reply for a moment, though I heard someone laughing, and the rays of the light were cast to the right and to the left of me to see that I was really alone. Finally orders were given for my admission. The gates went open with a creaking, and I was within Rouvres.

As I rode in I stopped to thank the officer for his courtesy, and the light being very clear, he observed my condition, and exclaimed, "*Diable!* But you have ridden far, monsieur, and with a led horse too!"

"I ride in the King's name, monsieur," I replied a little coldly, and, thanking him once more, was seized with

an inspiration, and begged the favour of his company at dinner at the *Grand Cerf*.

"With pleasure, monsieur. Permit me to introduce myself. I am the Chevalier d'Aubusson, lieutenant of M. de Sancy's company of ordonnance."

I raised my hat in response; "His Majesty has no braver sword than M. de Sancy. At twelve then, monsieur, I shall have the pleasure of meeting you again; good night, or rather good morning!"

"Adieu!" he answered, "I will be punctual. The *Grand Cerf* is but a couple of hundred toises to your right."

As I rode up the narrow and ill-paved street I heard d'Aubusson whistling a catch as he turned into the guard-room, and congratulated myself on my stratagem and the luck that had befriended it. I knew enough of court intrigue to be aware that de Sancy and the Marshal were at each other's throats, and that I could therefore always get protection here by declaring myself against Biron. Then came a short turn to the right, and Monsieur de Preaulx of the Anjoumois was at the door of the *Grand Cerf*. It opened to my knock, and Jacques, faithful knave, was in waiting. After this there followed the usual little delay and bustle consequent on a new arrival.

As I dismounted Jacques whispered in my ear, "You are M. de Preaulx of Saumur in the Anjoumois, monsieur."

"So M. d'Aubusson tells me," I replied in the same tone, and then louder, "but you might have made a mess of it, Jacques—however, you meant well, and I owe you five crowns for your good intentions. Now call mine host, and tell him to show me to my rooms whilst you see to the horses."

Mine host was already there, in slippered feet, with a long candle in one hand and a cup of warmed Romanée in the other. He led the way with many bows, and I limped after him to a room which was large and comfortable enough.

"Here is some mulled Romanée for monsieur le baron," he said, as he handed me the goblet; "his lordship the count will observe that the best room has been kept for him, and later on I will have the pleasure of setting the finest dinner in France before the most noble marquis; good night, monseigneur, good night and good dreams," and he tottered off, leaving me to drink the mulled wine, which was superb, and to sleep the sleep of the utterly weary.

It was late when I awoke and found Jacques in my room, attending to my things. The rest had done my leg good, although it was still stiff, and the wearing of a long boot painful. As I finished my toilet I asked my man,

"Horses ready?"

"They will be by the time Monsieur has dined. I shall put the valises on the nag we got at Evreux for you."

"Right. *Morbleu!* I hear M. d'Aubusson below. It is very late."

"It has just gone the dinner hour."

I hurried downstairs, leaving Jacques to pack, and was only just in time to receive my guest.

"A hundred pardons, monsieur; but I overslept myself."

"'Tis a sleepy place," he answered, "there is nothing to do but to sleep."

"Surely there is something to love."

"Not a decent ankle under a petticoat."

"At anyrate we can eat. Come, sit you down. My ride has made me hungry as a wolf, and I have far to go."

The dinner was excellent, the Armagnac of the finest vintage, and d'Aubusson to all appearances a gay frank-hearted fellow, and we became very friendly as the wine cup passed.

"Tell me what induced M. de Sancy to quarter his company here?" I asked towards the close of the meal, as the lieutenant was cursing his luck at being stationed at Rouvres.

He burst out laughing; "Oh! M. de Sancy has a government and five thousand livres a year to maintain his company, and being a pious soul has enlisted all the saints, and keeps them as far as possible from the temptations of Paris.

"Enlisted the saints!"

"Yes—this Armagnac is excellent—yes, the saints. Our gentlemen are all from heaven—there is St. André, St. Vincent, St. Martin, St. Blaise, St. Loy, St. Pol, and half the calendar besides!"

"Ha! ha! the heavenly host."

"Oh! I am proud, I assure you. I command the company from Paradise."

"Or the gendarmes of the Kyrielle."

"*Noel! Noel!*" he called out gaily, and as he did so we heard a clatter of hoofs in the courtyard, and a few moments afterwards the landlord ushered in two gentlemen. It took me but a glance to recognise in one the Italian Zamet, and in the other the Chevalier Lafin. It cost me an effort to compose myself, so much was I startled; but I comforted myself with the assurance that I was unknown to them, and that an arrest would be no

easy matter with Sancy's company at hand. Beyond bowing to us, however, as they passed, they took no further notice of me for the present, and contented themselves with ordering some wine, and conversing in low tones at the table at which they sat.

Nevertheless, it was a piece of ill luck. These men were evidently back on their way to Paris, and by coming through Rouvres had stumbled upon me in such a manner as to hold me at serious disadvantage. My one consolation was that Zamet did not look like a fighting man, and as for the other, there was an equal chance for each of us; but I had no idea what their force might be outside. It turned out that it was very small, and it was owing to this that the incident I am about to describe ended so peacefully. A look or two in our direction appeared to indicate that the new arrivals were discussing us, and my doubts were soon set at rest by a lackey entering and holding a brief whispered talk with Zamet. He dismissed the man quietly, and then bending forward said something to Lafin, and both, rising, approached us.

"Monsieur will pardon me," said Zamet, addressing me with his lisping Italian accent, "but I understand that you entered Rouvres late last night."

"Yes," I answered, whilst d'Aubusson raised his eyebrows and leaned back in his chair, twirling his moustache.

"Then would you be so kind as to inform me, if you came by the road from Anet, whether you met a wounded horseman riding this way?"

"Before I answer any questions, will you be good enough to tell me who you are, gentlemen?"

"I am Zamet, Comptroller of the King's household," replied the Italian.

"And I the Chevalier de Lafin, nephew and heir to the Vidame de Chartres."

"I see no reason to reply to your question, messieurs, even if you are the persons you name."

Zamet smiled slightly, with a meaning look towards Lafin, who burst out:

"Have a care, monsieur, remember I follow the Marshal duc de Biron."

"Of Burgundy and La Bresse," I added with a sneer, rising from my seat, my hand on my sword hilt.

"It is he," exclaimed the Italian, and Lafin, who saw my movement, stepped back half a pace, not from fear, but to gain room to draw his weapon.

"My dear lieutenant," and I turned to d'Aubusson, "you complain that this is a dull place. We shall now have some relaxation. These gentlemen want a question answered, and I say certainly—I suggest the garden as a suitable place for our conference. Will you do me the favour to look on?"

"That will be slower than ever for me. If you will allow me to join you?"

"Delighted. You are my guest, and it will make us exactly two to two. Now, gentlemen, I will answer your question on the lawn." Whilst we were speaking, some hurried words passed between Lafin and Zamet, and as I turned to them with my invitation the Italian answered:

"There was no offence meant, monsieur. We had business with the man from Anet," he looked hard at me as he spoke, "and at present we have not leisure to attend to you. We will, therefore, not intrude on you further. We but stay for a glass of wine, and then press onwards."

"Hum!" exclaimed d'Aubusson, surveying him from

head to boot-heel, and then turning an equally contemptuous look at Lafin, "you are very disobliging gentlemen."

"This is not to be borne," burst out Lafin. "Come, sir——"

But Zamet again interposed.

"*Diavolo!* Chevalier, your courage is known. We will settle with these gentlemen another day—you forget. Will you risk all now?" His companion put back his half-drawn sword with a curse and a snap, and, turning on his heel, went to the other end of the room, followed by Zamet. There they drank their wine and departed, and an hour later I also started. D'Aubusson insisted on accompanying me part of the way with a couple of his saints, and, as we approached the Paris gate, we observed a man riding slowly, a little ahead of us. "I recognise the grey," said Jacques, coming to my side. "Monsieur, that is one of the three servants the two gentlemen who have gone before had with them."

This small force accounted, as I have said, for the moderation Zamet had shown: but it flashed upon me that the lackey had been left behind for no other purpose than that of observing our route. Even if I was wrong in this surmise it was well to be prudent, and turning to d'Aubusson I said:

"Monsieur, I wish to be frank with you. It is true that I am bearing news to Paris which will be of the greatest service to the King; but my name is not de Preaulx."

"I know that," he said quietly, "I am of the Anjoumois, and there is no such name there."

"And you did not arrest me?"

"Why the devil should I? The land is at peace, and I have been Monsieur "I-Don't-Know-What" before now

myself. Besides, you were in my hands at the *Grand Cerf*. You are in my hands now. But I wanted to know more, and when I saw that you were an object of M. Zamet's attentions I knew you were on our side."

"Exactly so, and I owe you much for this. There is another favour I would ask."

"And it is?"

"That you stop the man riding ahead of us until this evening."

"As it will annoy Zamet, I shall do so with pleasure. I had half a mind to stop the shoemaker himself."

With this allusion to Zamet's ignoble origin he turned and gave a short order to his men. As we came up to the gate the man before us slackened pace so as to let us pass, with the obvious intention, so I thought, of following me at his convenience. He had hardly pulled rein when the two saints closed in, one on each side of him, and in a trice he was in their hands. He protested violently, as might have been expected, but in vain, and we waited until he was well out of sight on his way to the guard-room.

At the gate we asked which way Zamet and his party had gone.

"By Tacoignières, messieurs," answered the sentinel.

"Then my way is by Septeuil," I said. "I owe you a long debt, M. d'Aubusson, and will repay. We shall meet again."

"*Pardieu!* I hope so—and you dine with me at More's."

"Or where you will—adieu."

"A good journey."

And with a parting wave of my hand I turned Couronne's head, and galloped off, followed by Jacques.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MASTER-GENERAL.

IN the labyrinth of narrow streets, crooked roads, and blind alleys behind the Palais de Justice, where the houses are so crowded, that they seem to climb one over the other in their efforts to reach higher and higher in their search for air, is a small street called the Rue des Deux Mondes. It had this advantage—that it was wider than most of the other roads in that part of Paris, and opened out abruptly on to the river face, very nearly opposite the upper portion of the Pont Neuf, then under course of construction but not to be finished for some years later. At the corner of the street and overlooking the river, the Pont Neuf, the Passeur aux Vaches, with a glimpse of the Quai Malaquais and the mansions of the Faubourg St. Germain, was a house of moderate size kept and owned by a Maître Pantin, who was engaged, nominally, in some legal business in the courts of the city. I say nominally, because he was in reality an agent of the Huguenot party, who, having contributed so largely to help the King to his own, were in reward restricted from the public exercise of their religion to a radius of thirty miles beyond Paris. This restriction did not, however, apply to Madame Catherine, the King's sister, now the Duchess de Bar, and a few of the great nobles such as Bouillon, de Guiche, de Pangeas, and one or two others, who had declined to follow the King's example and see the error of their religious

ways, and who when in the capital were allowed to attend the princess' daily *prêche* in the Louvre, a thing which exasperated all Paris, and induced Monseigneur the Archbishop de Gondy to make public protest to the King, and to come back very downcast with a carrot for his cabbage.

It was this house of Maître Pantin's, it will be remembered, that had been recommended to me as a lodging by Palin, who told me of the owner's occupation, and when I demurred on account of my religious convictions, the Huguenot pointed out that I had to do things in Paris which required a safe retreat, and that he could vouch for the honesty and discretion of Pantin. I admitted that his arguments were reasonable, and resolved to take advantage of his recommendation.

We rode into Paris by the St. Germain's gate, and I was immediately struck by the aspect of gloom that the city wore. Most of the shops were indeed open, but there appeared to be no business doing, and instead of men hurrying backwards and forwards, the streets were filled with groups of people evidently engaged in discussing some affair of the utmost moment. Every third or fourth man wore a black scarf over his right arm, and the bells of the churches were tolling dismally for the dead. From St. Germain des Prés, from St. Severin, from the airy spire of Ste. Chapelle, they called out mournfully, and above them all, drowning the distant voices of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, St. Jacques de la Boucherie, St. Antoine, and others less known to fame, pealed out the solemn notes of the Bourdon of Nôtre Dame.

Near the Pré-aux-clercs, hundreds of long-robed students were assembled, and the windows of many of the great houses, including the Logis de Nevers, were hung

with black. It was strange to see Paris, always so bright and gay, with this solemn air upon it. No notice was taken of us as we rode on, the knots of people merely moving aside to let us pass, and answering Jacques' cheerful "good-day" with a silent inclination of the head or a chill indifference.

"*Pardieu, monsieur,*" exclaimed Jacques, as we turned up the Rue de la Harpe, hard by the Hôtel de Cluny, "one would think the King himself were dead, these gentry pull such long faces." My servant's chance observation sent a sudden shock through me. What if Henry was dead! What if I had got only one thread of the plot that was weaving at Anet? I did not answer Jacques; but observing a Capuchin priest advancing in my direction, I reined in Couronne, and giving him the day, asked what it was that had befallen the city. He looked up at me in a slight surprise, and then, observing my travel-stained appearance, replied:

"I see you are a stranger, sir; but have you not heard the news—it should have gone far by this?"

"I have not, as you see—but what is it? Surely the King is not dead?"

"God forbid," he answered, "no, not the King; but she who in a few weeks would have been Queen of France."

"The Duchesse de Beaufort?"

"Exactly."

"I knew that; but you don't mean to say that the city is in mourning for the mistress of the King?"

He looked at me straight in the face, and stroked his white beard thoughtfully. He was a tall, a very tall, thin man, and his eyes, of the clearest blue, seemed to lighten with a strange light.

"No, my son, not for the mistress of the King, as you call her, but for the open hand and the generous heart, for the kindly soul that never turned from suffering or from sorrow, for Magdalen bountiful, and, let us hope, Magdalen repentant."

"But——"

"Adieu, my son—think of what I have said. Is your own heart so pure that you can afford to cast a stone at the dead?" And without waiting for a further answer he went onwards. I turned and watched the tall, slim figure as it moved through the crowd, the people making way for him on every side as if he were a prince of the church.

But though he was slowly passing out of sight, he had left words behind him that were at their work. This was the woman whom I had openly reviled as fallen and beyond the pale—had I any right to cast stones? For a moment I was lost in myself, when Jacques' voice cut into my thoughts.

"That must have been a cardinal at least, monsieur, though he does not look like the Cardinal du Perron, whom we heard preach at Rheims—I will ask," and he inquired who the Capuchin was, of a man who had just come up.

"That is the *père* Ange, monsieur," was the answer, and the man went on, leaving Jacques' thanks in the air.

The *père* Ange. The name brought back a host of recollections to me as I shook up Couronne's reins and headed her towards the Pont St. Michel. I saw myself a boy again in the suite of Joyeuse, and remembered with what awe I used to gaze on the brilliant de Bouchage, his brother, who was a frequent visitor at Orleans. His splendid attire, his courtly air, the great deeds he had

done were in all men's mouths. We youngsters, who saw him at a respectful distance, aped the cut of his cloak, the tilt of his sword, the cock of his plumed hat. If we only knew how he made love, we would have tried to do so in like manner; but for this each one of us had to find out a way of his own.

All at once it was rumoured that the chevalier had vanished, disappeared mysteriously, and that every trace of him was lost. There were men who whispered of the Chatelet, or, worse still, the Bastille; others who said the Seine was very deep near the mills by the Pont aux Meuniers; others who put together the sudden retreat from the court of the brilliant but infamous Madame de Sauves, the Rose of Guise, with the disappearance of de Bouchage, and shook their heads and winked knowingly. They were all wrong. Gradually the truth came out, and it became known that the polished courtier, the great soldier, and the splendid cavalier had thrown away the world as one would fling aside an old cloak, and buried himself in a cloister.

It was a ten days' wonder; then other things happened, and perhaps not one in ten thousand remembered, in the saintly *père* Ange, the once fiery prince of the house of Joyeuse.

I have mentioned this because of his reproof to me. Day by day my education was progressing, and I began to recognise that my virtue was pitiless, that I was too ready to judge harshly of others. *Père* Ange's reproof was a lesson I meant to profit by; and now—to the abode of Maître Pantin.

Palin's directions were clear, and after crossing the Pont St. Michel, a wooden bridge, we kept to the south of Ste. Chapelle, and then, after many a twist and turn, found

ourselves in the Rue des Deux Mondes, before the doors of Pantin's house.

The master himself answered my knock and stood in the doorway, a small, wizened figure, looking at us cautiously from grey eyes, shadowed by bushy white brows.

"Good-day, monsieur—what is it I can do for you?"

"You are Maître Pantin?"

"At your service."

"And I am the Chevalier d'Auriac. I have come to Paris from Bidache on business, and need a lodging. Maître Palin has recommended me to you."

"Enough, monsieur le chevalier. My friend Palin's name is sufficient, and I have need of clients, for the house is empty. If Monsieur's servant will lead the horses through that lane there, he will find an entrance to the stables—and will Monsieur step in and take a seat while I summon my wife—Annette! Annette!"

I limped in and sat down, escorted by expressions of compassion from Pantin, who mingled these with shouts for Annette. In a little time Madame Pantin appeared, and never have I seen so great a resemblance between husband and wife as between these two. There was the same small, shrivelled figure, the same clear-cut features, the same white eyebrows standing prominently out over the same grey eyes—their height, walk, and tone of voice even, was almost the same. Madame, however, had an eye to business, which her husband, although I understood him to be a notary, had not discovered to me, and whilst he went off to see, as he said, to the arrangements for the horses, Madame Annette struck a bargain with me for my lodging, which I closed with at once, as I was in sufficient funds to be a little extravagant. This matter being arranged by my instant agreement to her terms, she

showed me to my rooms, which were on the second floor, and commanded a good view of the river face; and, pocketing a week's rental in advance, the old lady retired, after recommending me to an ordinary where the food was excellent and the Frontignac old.

I spent the remainder of the day doing nothing, going forth but to sup quietly at the Two Ecus, which I found fully upheld the good name Madame Pantin had given it, and returning early to my rooms.

Sitting in an easy chair at a window overlooking the Seine, I lost myself for awhile in a dreamland of reverie. Let it be remembered that I was a man of action, who had been awakened by the love he bore for a woman to a sense of his own unfitness, and it will be realised how difficult it was for me to look into myself. I tried to tick off my failings in my mind, and found they were hydra-headed. There were some that I alone could not combat, and I hated myself for my want of moral strength. I had groped towards religion for aid, to the faith of my fathers; but there were doctrines and canons there that I could not reconcile with my inward conscience. I could not believe all I was asked to take on trust, and I felt I was insensibly turning towards the simpler faith of the Huguenot. But here, again, I was in troublous waters. I had got over the sinful pride that prevented me from approaching my God in humbleness, but I found that prayer, though it gave momentary relief, did not give permanent strength to resist, and a sort of spiritual despair fell upon me. Along with this was an unalterable longing to be near the woman I loved, to feel her presence about me, to know that she loved me as I loved her, and, in short, I would rather go ten times up to a battery of guns than feel over again the desolation and agony of

spirit that was on me then. So I spent an hour or so in a state of hopeless mental confusion, and at last I cut it short by pulling myself up abruptly. Win or lose, I would follow the dictates of my conscience. If I could, I would win the woman I loved, and with God's help and her aid lead such a life as would bring us both to Him when we died. It was a quick, unspoken prayer that went up from me, and it brought back in a moment its comfort.

Jacques' coming into the room at this juncture was a relief. He lit the tall candles that stood in the grotesque bronze holders that projected from the wall, and then, drawing the curtains, inquired if I needed his services further that night.

"I don't think so, Jacques—but stay!"

"Monsieur."

"How do we stand?"

"Oh, well enough, monsieur. Better really than for a long time. We have three horses and their equipment—although one of Monsieur's pistols is broken—and a full hundred and fifty crowns."

"A perfect fortune—are you sure of the crowns?"

"As I am of being here, monsieur."

"Well, then, there is something I want you to do, and attend with both ears."

"Monsieur."

"I want you to take the two horses we got at Evreux and fifty crowns, and go back to Ezy. Keep ten crowns for yourself and give forty to the smith and his daughter, and take them with you to Auriac. The forester's lodge is vacant—let them live there, or, if they like, there is room enough in the château. I will give you a letter to Bozon. He wants help, and these people will be of service to him. After you have done this, sell one of the

horses—you may keep the proceeds, and come back to me. If I am not here you will get certain news of me, and can easily find me out—you follow?”

“Exactly.”

“Then when will you be prepared to start?”

“As soon as Monsieur le Chevalier is suited with another man as faithful as I.”

“Eh!”

“*Sangdieu!* monsieur, I shall never forget what *père* Michel and the old steward Bozon said when I came home last without you. I believe if I were to do so again the good *curé* would excommunicate me, and Maître Bozon would have me flung into the bay to follow. If I were to go back and leave you alone in Paris anything might happen. No! no! My fathers have served Auriac for two hundred years, and it shall never be said that Jacques Bisson left the last of the old race to die alone—never!”

“My friend, you are mad—who the devil talks of dying?”

“Monsieur, I am not such a fool as perhaps I look. Do I not understand that Monsieur has an affair in hand which has more to do with a rapier than a ribbon? If not, why the night ride, why the broken pistol, and the blood-stained saddle of Couronne? If Monsieur had come to Paris in the ordinary way, we would have been at court, fluttering it as gaily as the rest, and cocking our bonnets with the best of them—instead of hiding here like a fox in his lair.”

“You are complimentary; but it is to help me I want you to do this.”

“The best help Monsieur can have is a true sword at his elbow—Monsieur will excuse me, but I will not go,” and, angry as his tone was, there were tears in the honest

fellow's eyes. Of course I could have dismissed the man; but I knew him too well not to know that nothing short of killing him would rid me of him. Again I was more than touched by his fidelity. Nevertheless, I was determined to carry out my project of making up to Marie in some way for the death of Nicholas, and resolved to temporise with Jacques. There was no one else to send, and it would have to be my stout-hearted knave; but the business was to get him to go.

"Very well, Jacques; but remember, if I get other temporary help that you approve of you will have to go."

"In that case, monsieur, it is different."

"Then it must be your business to see to this, and now good night."

"Good night, monsieur," and he took himself off.

I had made up my mind to lay my information before Sully. That he was in Paris I knew, having obtained the information from Pantin, and it was my intention to repair the next day to the Hôtel de Béthune, and tell the minister all. The night was one of those in which sleep would not come, not because the place was a strange one—I was too old a campaigner to lose rest because the same feather pillow was not under my head every night—but because my thoughts kept me awake. What these were I have already described, and they were in force sufficient to banish all sleep until the small hours were well on, and I at last dropped off, with the solemn notes of the Bourdon ringing in my ears.

It was about ten o'clock the next morning that I mounted Couronne, and, followed by Jacques, well armed, took my way towards the Hôtel de Béthune. We found the Barillierie thronged with people on their way to St. Denis to witness the burial of Madame de Beaufort,

and the Pont au Change was so crowded that we had to wait there for a full half-hour. At last we got across the bridge, on which in their eagerness for gain the money-changers had fixed their stalls, and pushed and struggled and fought over their business on each side of the narrow track they left for the public. Finally, we passed the grey walls of the Grand Chatelet, and turning to our right, past St. Jacques, the Place de Grève, and the Hôtel de Ville, got into the Rue St. Antoine by a side street that ran from St. Gervais to the Baudets. Here we found the main street almost deserted, all Paris having crowded to the funeral, and a quarter-mile or so brought us to the gates of the Hôtel de Béthune.

Sully had just received the Master-Generalship of the Ordnance, and at his door was a guard of the regiment of La Ferte. I knew the blue uniforms with the white sashes well, and they had fought like fiends at Fontaine Française and Ham. The officer on guard very civilly told me that the minister did not receive that day, but on my insisting and pointing out that my business was of the utmost importance, he gave way with a shrug of his shoulders. "Go on, monsieur le chevalier, but I can tell you it is of no use; however, that is a business you must settle with Ivoy, the duke's secretary."

I thanked him, and, dismounting and flinging the reins to Jacques, passed up the courtyard and up the stone steps to the entrance door. Here I was met by the same statement, that Sully was unable to receive to-day; but, on my insisting, the secretary Ivoy appeared and asked me my name and business.

"I have given my name twice already, monsieur," I answered. "I am the Chevalier d'Auriac, and as for my business it is of vital import, and is for Monseigneur's ear

alone—you will, therefore, excuse me if I decline to mention it to you.”

Ivoy bowed. “It will come to me in its own good time, monsieur. Will you be seated? I will deliver your message to the duke; but I am afraid it will be of little use.”

“I take the risk, Monsieur d’Ivoy.”

“But not the rating, chevalier,” and the secretary, with a half-smile on his face, went out and left me to myself. In a few minutes he returned.

“The duke will see you, monsieur—this way, please.”

“*Pardieu!*” I muttered to myself as I followed Ivoy, “he keeps as much state as if he were the chancellor himself. However, I have a relish for Monseigneur’s soup.”

Ivoy led the way up a winding staircase of oak, so old that it was black as ebony, and polished as glass. At the end of this was a landing, where a couple of lackeys were lounging on a bench before a closed door. They sprang up at our approach, and Ivoy tapped gently at the door.

“Come in,” was the answer, given in a cold voice, and the next moment we were in the room.

“Monsieur le Chevalier d’Auriac,” and Ivoy had presented me.

Sully inclined his head frigidly to my bow, and then motioned to Ivoy to retire. When we were alone, he turned to me with a brief “Well?”

“I have information of the utmost importance which I wish to lay before you.”

“I hear that ten times a day from people. Will your story take long to tell?”

“That depends.”

“Then be seated for a moment, whilst I write a note.”

I took the chair he pointed out, and he began to write rapidly. Whilst he was doing this I had a glance round the room. It was evidently the duke's working cabinet, and it bore everywhere the marks of the prim exactness of its master's character. There was no litter of papers on the table. The huge piles of correspondence on it were arranged neatly, one file above the other. All the books in the long shelves that lined the walls were numbered, the curtains were drawn back at exact angles to the curtain poles, the chairs were set squarely, there was not a thing out of place, not a speck of dust, not a blot on the brown leather writing-pad, on the polished walnut of the table before which Sully sat. On the wall opposite to him was a portrait of Madame de Sully. It was the only ornament in the room. The portrait itself showed a sprightly-looking woman with a laughing eye, and she looked down on her lord and master from the painted canvas with a merry smile on her slightly parted lips. As for the man himself, he sat squarely at his desk, writing rapidly with an even motion of his pen. He was plainly but richly dressed, without arms of any kind. His collar was ruffed in the English fashion, but worn with a droop, over which his long beard, now streaked with grey, fell almost to the middle of his breast. He was bald, and on each side of his high, wrinkled forehead there was a thin wisp of hair, brushed neatly back. His clear eyes looked out coldly, but not unkindly, from under the dark, arched eyebrows, and his short moustaches were carefully trimmed and twisted into two points that stuck out one on each side of his long straight nose. The mouth itself was small, and the lips were drawn together tightly, not, it seemed, naturally, but by a constant habit that had become second nature. It was as if there were two spirits in this man.

One a genial influence that was held in bonds by the other, a cold, calculating, intellectual essence. Such was Maximilian de Béthune, Marquis de Rosny and Duc de Sully. He was not yet nominally chief minister. But it was well known that he was in the King's inmost secrets, and that there was no man who held more real power in the State than the Master-General of the Ordnance. As I finished my survey of him, he finished his despatch, and after folding and addressing it he turned it upside down and said to me:

"Now for your important news, monsieur. It must be very important to have brought *you* here."

"I do not understand?"

He looked at me, a keen inquiry in his glance. "You do not understand?" he said.

"Indeed, no, monseigneur."

"Hum! You are either deeper than I take you to be, or a born fool. Look, you, are you not Alban de Breuil, Sieur d'Auriac, who was lately in arms in the service of Spain against France as a rebel and a traitor?"

"I was on the side of the League."

"Monsieur, the League died at Ivry——"

"But not for us."

He made an impatient gesture. "We won't discuss that. Are you not the man I refer to? Say yes or no."

"I am d'Auriac—there is no other of my name—but no more a rebel or traitor than Messieurs de Guise, de Mayenne, and others. The King's Peace has pardoned us all. Why should I fear to come to you? I have come to do you a service, or rather the King a service."

"Thank you. May I ask if you did not receive a warning at La Fère, and another at Bidache?"

"From M. d'Ayen—yes. Monseigneur, I refuse to believe what I heard."

"And yet your name heads a list of half a dozen whom the King's Peace does not touch. One of my reasons for receiving you was to have you arrested."

"It is a high honour, all this bother about a poor gentleman of Normandy, when Guise, de Mayenne, Epernon, and others keep their skins whole."

"You have flown your hawk at too high a quarry, monsieur."

"Then that painted ape, d'Ayen, told a true tale," I burst out in uncontrollable anger. "Monseigneur, do what you will to me. Remember that you help to the eternal dishonour of the King."

The words hit him, and the blood flushed darkly under the pale olive of the man's cheek.

"Monsieur, you forget yourself."

"It is not I, but you who do so—you who forget that your name is Béthune. Yes, touch that bell. I make no resistance. I presume it will be the Chatelet?"

His hand, half stretched towards the button of the call-bell before him, suddenly stayed itself.

"Were my temper as hasty as your tongue, monsieur, it would have been the Chatelet in half an hour."

"Better that——" I began, but he interrupted me with a quick wave of his hand.

"Monsieur d'Auriac, a time will come when you will have reason to regret the words you have used towards me. I do not mean regret them in the place you have mentioned, but in your heart. In this business the honour of Béthune as well as the honour of the King is at stake. Do you think I am likely to throw my hazard like an infant?"

I was silent, but a dim ray of hope flickered up in my heart as I looked at the man before me, and felt, I know not why, in the glance of his eye, in the tone of the voice, in his very gestures, that here was one who had conquered himself, and who knew how to rule.

"Now, sir," he went on, the animation in his tone dropping to a cold and frigid note, "proceed with your tale."

It was a thing easier ordered than done, but I managed it somehow, trying to be as brief as possible, without missing a point. Sully listened without a movement of his stern features, only his eyes seemed to harden like crystal as I spoke of Biron and Zamet. When I told what I heard of the death of Madame de Beaufort, he turned his head to the open window and kept it thus until I ended. When he looked back again at me, however, there was not a trace of emotion in his features, and his voice was as cold and measured as ever as he asked.

"And your reward for this news, chevalier?"

"Is not to be measured in pistoles, monseigneur."

"I see; and is this all?"

His tone chilled me. "It is all—no," and with a sudden thought, "give me twenty men, and in a week I put the traitors in your hands."

He fairly laughed out. "*Corbæuf!* Monsieur le chevalier, do you want to set France ablaze?"

"It seems, monseigneur, that the torch is held at Anet," I answered a little sulkily.

"But not lighted yet; leave the dealing with that to me. And, monsieur, the King is at Fontainebleau, and for a month nothing can be done. And see here, monsieur, I can do nothing for you; you follow. At the end of a month go and see the King. Tell him your story,

and, if he believes you, claim your reward. I will go so far as to promise that you will be received."

All the little hope I had begun to gather fluttered away at these words like a scrap of paper cast in the wind. "Monseigneur," I said, and my voice sounded strangely even to my own ears, "in a month it will be too late."

"Leave that to me," he answered. "I have a reminder always before my eyes," and he pointed through the open window in the direction of a house that towered above the others surrounding it.

"I do not follow," I stammered.

"That is the Hôtel de Zamet," he said grimly, and I thought I understood why he had turned to the window when I spoke of Madame de Beaufort's death.

I rose with a sigh I could barely repress: "Then there is nothing for me to do but to wait?"

"You will not lose by doing so."

"I thank you, monseigneur; but there is one little favour I ask."

"And that is?"

"The King's Peace until I see the King."

"You will be safer in the Chatelet, I assure you, but as you wish—stay—stay, there is one thing. Not a word of your interview with me, even to the King."

My hopes rose again. "On my faith as a gentleman, I will not mention it."

As I finished he struck his bell sharply twice, and Ivoy entered.

"Ivoy, do me the favour to conduct Monsieur d'Auriac to the gates yourself, and impress upon him the necessity of keeping to his lodging. The air of Paris out-of-doors is unhealthy at present. Good-day, monsieur."

Ivoy bowed, with a slight upraising of his eyebrows, and we passed out. Going down the stairway, he said to me with a smile: "I see you dine at home to-day, chevalier."

"At the Two Ecus," I answered, pretending not to understand his allusion, and he chuckled low to himself. At the gates I observed that the guards were doubled, and a whispered word passed between Ivoy and the officer in command. But of this also I took no notice, and, wishing them the day, rode back as I came.

CHAPTER X.

AN OLD FRIEND.

I WAS not the man to neglect Sully's warning, and, besides, there was an added reason for being careful of dark corners, as both Zamet and Lafin knew me, and were unlikely to lose any opportunity of doing me harm that might come their way. I could do nothing but wait and exercise patience until the month was over, and it was a hard enough task. Beyond my daily visits to my ordinary, I went nowhere and saw no one. I occasionally, of course, met my landlord and his wife, but few words passed between us, and Jacques had become marvellously taciturn, so that I was alone as if I were in a desert in that vast city, where the roar of the day's traffic and the hum of voices seemed to vibrate through, and possess the stillest hours of the night. Doubtless there were men of my acquaintance in Paris, but I did not seek them, for the reasons already stated, and I lived as secluded a life as though I had taken the vows of a hermit.

In the meantime I was more than anxious that Jacques should execute my plan in regard to Marie. That I felt was a debt of honour to myself; but though I tried the threat of dismissal, he refused to go point blank, and I was weak enough to allow him his way. It was one of the many instances in which my firmness of temper failed, but it is not possible for a man always to keep his heart in a Milan corselet. I could not make out Sully's reasons

for his action. It seemed to me that he had got all my information out of me without pledging himself to anything in return, and that he held me as safely as a cat does a wounded mouse. To save my own skin by quitting Paris was a thought I can honestly aver that never came to me. It could not, with the all-pervading presence of my love for Madame. It was for her sake I was here, and for her sake I would go cheerfully to the block if it need be; but it would not be without a try to save her, and if the worst came to the worst I should let all France know the infamy of her King. The hero-worship I had in my heart for him had given place to a bitter hatred for the man who was using his power to drive a woman to ruin, and inflict upon me the most bitter sorrow. All this may sound foolish, but such was my frame of mind, and I was yet to know how great the man was whom I hated—but of that on another day. In the meantime there was no news from Bidache, and I was kept on the cross with anxiety lest some danger had befallen my dear one there. Anet was not three hours' ride away, and at Anet was de Gomeron, unless indeed the conspirators had scattered, as was not at all unlikely, after the manner in which they had been discovered. My doubts in regard to Madame's safety were set at rest about three weeks after my interview with Sully. One evening Pantin knocked at my door, and, on my bidding him enter, came in with many apologies for disturbing me.

"But, chevalier," he added, "I have news that Monsieur will no doubt be glad to hear."

"Then let me have it, Maître Pantin, for good news has been a stranger to me for long."

"It is this. Our friend Palin arrives in Paris to-morrow or the day after."

"And stays here?"

"No, for he comes in attendance on Madame de la Bidache, and will doubtless live at the Rue Varenne."

I half turned for a moment to the window to hide the expression of joy on my face I could not conceal otherwise. Were it daylight I might have been able to see the trees in the gardens of the Rue Varenne; but it was night, and the stars showed nothing beyond the white spectral outline of the Tour de Nesle beyond the Malaquais.

"Indeed, I am glad to hear this," I said as I looked round once more; "though Paris will be dull for Madame."

"Not so, monsieur, for the King comes back to-morrow, and the gossips say that before another fortnight is out there will be another *maîtresse en titre* at the Louvre. *Ciel!* How many of them there have been, from poor La Fosseuse to the D'Estrées."

"Maître Pantin, I forgot myself—will you help yourself to the Frontignac?"

"A hundred thanks, monsieur le chevalier. Is there any message for Palin? *Pouf!* But I forget. What has a handsome young spark like you got in common with an old greybeard? You will be at court in a week; and they will all be there—bright-eyed D'Entragues, Mary of Guise, Charlotte de Givry, and——"

"Maître Pantin, these details of the court do not interest me. Tell Palin I would see him as soon as he arrives. Ask him as a favour to come here. He said you were discreet——"

"And I know that Monsieur le Chevalier is likewise." With a quick movement of the hand the short grey goatee that Pantin wore vanished from his chin, and there was before me not the face of the notary, but that of Annette.

She laughed out at the amaze in my look, but quickly changed her tone.

"Maître Palin said you were to be trusted utterly, monsieur, and you see I have done so. Your message will be safely delivered, and I promise he will see you. But have you no other?"

"None," I answered, a little bitterly.

"I have, however, and it is this," and she placed in my hand a little packet. "Monsieur may open that at his leisure," and she turned as if to go.

"One moment—I do not understand. What is the meaning of this masquerade?"

"Only this, that my husband will appear to have been at the same time at the Quartier du Marais as well as the Faubourg St. Germain. I would add that Monsieur would be wise to keep indoors as he is doing. We have found out that the house is being watched. Good-night, monsieur," and, with a nod of her wrinkled face, this strange woman vanished.

I appeared in truth to be the sport of mystery, and it seemed as if one of those sudden gusts of anger to which I was subject was coming on me. I controlled myself with an effort, and with a turn of my fingers tore open the packet, and in it lay my lost knot of ribbon. For a moment the room swam round me, and I became as cold as ice. Then came the revulsion, and with trembling fingers I raised the token to my lips and kissed it a hundred times. There were no written words with it; there was nothing but this little worn bow! but it told a whole story to me. It had come down to me, that ribbon that Marescot said was hung too high for de Breuil of Auriac; and God alone knows how I swore to guard it, and how my heart thanked Him for His goodness to me. For ten

long minutes I was in fairyland, and then I saw myself as I was, proscribed and poor, almost in the hands of powerful enemies, striving to fight an almost hopeless cause with nothing on my side and everything against me. Even were it otherwise, the rock of Auriac was too bare to link with the broad lands of Pelouse and Bidache, and, love her as I did, I could never hang my sword in my wife's halls. It was impossible, utterly impossible. So I was tossed now one way, now another, until my mental agony was almost insupportable.

The next day nothing would content me but that I must repair to the Rue Varenne, and, if possible, get a glimpse of Madame as she arrived. I left instructions that Palin should be asked to wait for me if he came during my absence; for my impatience was too great to admit of my staying in for him. I was not, however, in so great a hurry as to entirely neglect the warning I had received, and dressed myself as simply as possible, removing the plumes from my hat, and wearing a stout buff coat under my long cloak. Thus altered I might be mistaken for a Huguenot, but hardly anyone would look for a former cavalier of the League in the solemnly-dressed man who was strolling to the end of the Malaquais. There I took a boat and went by river the short distance that lay between me and the jetty at the Rue de Bac. At the jetty I disembarked, and went leisurely towards the Rue Varenne. As I was crossing the Rue Grenelle, hard by the Logis de Conde, a half-dozen gentlemen came trotting by and took up the road. I stopped to let them pass, and saw to my surprise that amongst them were my old comrades in arms, de Cosse-Brissac, Tavannes, and de Gie. I was about to wave my hand in greeting, when I recognised amongst them the sinister face

of Lafin riding on the far side of me. Quick as thought I pretended to have dropped something, and bent down as if to search for it. The pace they were going at prevented any one of them, not even excepting Lafin, with his hawk's eye, from recognising me; but it did not prevent Tavannes from turning in his saddle and flinging me a piece of silver with the gibe, "Go on all fours for that, maître Huguenot." I kept my head low, and made a rush for the silver, whilst they rode off laughing, a laugh in which I joined myself, though with different reasons. On reaching the Rue Varenne I had no difficulty in finding the house I sought; the arms on the entrance gate gave me this information; and I saw that Madame had only just arrived, and had I been but a half-hour earlier I might have seen and even spoken with her. I hung about for some minutes on the chance of getting a glimpse of her, with no success; then finding that my lounging backwards and forwards outside the gates was beginning to attract attention from the windows of a house opposite, I took myself off, feeling a little foolish at what I had done.

I came back the way I went, and as I walked down the Malaquais met master Jacques taking an airing with two companions. In one of them I recognised Vallon, my old friend de Belin's man; the other I did not know, though he wore the *sang-de-bœuf* livery of the Comte de Belin. Having no particular interest in lackeys I paid him no further attention, though, could I but have seen into the future, it would have been a good deed to have killed him where he stood.

On seeing me Vallon and Jacques both stopped, and I signalled to them to cross over the road to me, as I was anxious to hear news of Belin, who was an intimate friend. This they did, and on my inquiry Vallon in-

formed me that Belin was at his hotel in the Rue de Bourdonnais, and the good fellow urged me to come there at once, saying that his master would never forgive him were he not to insist on my coming. I was truly glad to hear Belin was in Paris. He was a tried friend, whose assistance I could rely on in any emergency; and, telling Vallon I would be at the Rue de Bourdonnais shortly, I went on to my lodging, followed by Jacques, leaving Vallon to go onwards with his companion.

On coming home I found, as might be expected, that there was no sign of Palin, and, after waiting for him until the dinner hour, gave him up for the present and rode off to the Two Ecus; and when my dinner, a very simple one, was finished, took my way to the Rue de Bourdonnais, this time mounted on Couronne, with Jacques, well armed, on the sorrel.

The hotel of the Comte de Belin lay at the west end of the Rue de Bourdonnais, close to the small house wherein lived Madame de Montpensier of dreadful memory; and on reaching it I found that it more than justified the description Belin had given of it to me, one day whilst we were idling in the trenches before Dourlens. It stood some way back from the road, and the entrance to the courtyard was through a wonderfully worked iron gateway, a counterpart, though on a smaller scale, of the one at Anet. At each corner of the square building was a hanging turret, and from the look of the windows of one of these I guessed that my friend had taken up his quarters there.

I was met by Vallon, who said he had informed his master of my coming; and, telling a servant to hold my horse, he ushered me in, talking of a hundred things at once. I had not gone ten steps up the great stairway

when Belin himself appeared, running down to meet me. "*Croix Dieu!*" he burst out as we embraced. "I thought you were with the saints, and that de Rône, you and a hundred others were free from all earthly troubles.

"Not yet, de Belin. I trust that time will be far distant."

"Amen! But you as good as buried yourself alive, at anyrate."

"How so?"

"Vallon tells me you have been a month in Paris, and you have never once been to the Rue de Bourdonnais until now. You might have known, man, that this house is as much yours as mine."

"My dear friend, there were reasons."

He put a hand on each of my shoulders, looked at me in the face with kind eyes, and then laughed out.

"Reasons! *Pardieu!* I can hardly make you out. You have a face a half-toise in length, never a plume in your hat, and a general look of those hard-praying and, I will say, hard-fighting gentry who gave the King his own again."

"How loyal you have become."

"We were all wrong—the lot of us—and I own my mistake; but you—you have not turned Huguenot, have you?"

"Not yet," I smiled; "and is Madame de Belin in Paris?"

"*Diable!*" and he made a wry face. "Come up to my den, and I'll tell you everything. Vallon, you grinning ape, fetch a flask of our old Chambertin—I will show M. le Chevalier up myself."

And linking me by the arm, he led me up the stairway, and along a noble corridor hung on each side with

the richest tapestry, until we reached a carved door that opened into the rooms in the turret.

"Here we are," Belin said, as we entered. "I find that when Madame is away these rooms are enough for me. *Tiens!* How a woman's presence can fill a house. Sit down there! And here comes Vallon. Set the wine down there, Vallon, and leave us."

He poured out a full measure for me, then one for himself, and stretched himself out in an arm-chair, facing me. I always liked the man, with his gay cynicism—if I may use the phrase—his kind heart and his reckless life; and I knew enough to tell that if Madame la Comtesse had been a little more forbearing she might have moulded her husband as she willed.

"Belin," I said, "I am so old a friend, I know you will forgive me for asking why, if you miss Madame's presence, you do not have her here?"

"Oh, she has got one of her fits, and has gone to grow pears at Belin. It was all through that fool Vallon."

"Vallon!"

"Yes. Bassompierre, de Vitry, myself, and one or two others, had arranged a little supper, with cards to follow, at More's. You don't know More's, but I'll take you there. Well, to continue: I had gone through about three weeks of my own fireside before this arrangement was made, and longed to stretch my legs a little. To tell Sophie would only cause a discussion. It is as much as I can do to get her to the Louvre accompanied by myself. So when the evening arrived I pleaded urgent business over my steward's accounts, and, giving orders that I was not to be disturbed under any circumstances, came here to my study, a duplicate key to the door of which Sophie keeps. I put Vallon in that chair there be-

fore the writing-table, after having made him throw on my *robe-de-chambre*, and gave him instructions to wave his hand in token that he was not to be disturbed if Madame la Comtesse came in, and, after thoroughly drilling the rascal, vanished by the private stair—the entrance to that is just behind my wife's portrait there."

"And then?"

"Well, we had as pleasant an evening as might be expected. I won five hundred pistoles and came home straight to my study, and on entering it imagine my feelings on seeing Sophie there—and you can guess the rest."

"Poor devil," I laughed, "so your little plan failed utterly."

"Vallon failed utterly. It appears that Sophie came up about ten, and being waved off, went away. She returned, however, about an hour later to find Monsieur Vallon, who had got tired of his position, asleep with his mouth open in the chair in which you are sitting. She refused to believe it was only a card party—though I said I would call the Marshal and de Vitry to witness—burst into tears, and in fine, my friend, I had a bad quarter of an hour, and Sophie has gone off to Belin."

"And the pistoles?" I asked slyly.

He looked at me, and we both laughed.

"She took them," he answered.

"Belin," I said after a moment, "will you ever change?"

"*Ventre St. Gris!* As the King swears. Why should I? After all, Sophie will come round again. I really am very happy. I have many things to be thankful for. I can always help a friend——"

"I know that," I interrupted, "and I want your help."

"How much is it? Or is it a second?"

"Neither, thanks. Though in either case I would come to you without hesitation. The fact is—" and I explained to him my difficulty in providing for Marie, without, however, going into other matters, or giving him any account of my troubles.

When I ended, Belin said, "What you want, then, is a trustworthy fellow."

"At least that is what Jacques wants. I can get on well enough."

"*Morbleu!* It is more than I could; but, as it happens, I have the very thing for you. Pull that bell-rope behind you, will you? and oblige a lazy man."

I did so, and in a minute or so Vallon appeared, wiping his mouth suspiciously with the back of his hand.

"Vallon," said de Belin, "does Ravillac continue to work satisfactorily?"

"As ever, monsieur le comte."

"Well, I am going to lend him to the Chevalier, who has need of his services."

"Monsieur."

"Send him up here, and Bisson, too."

Vallon bowed and vanished, as I said,

"I do not know how to thank you, Belin."

"*Pouf!* A mere bagatelle. I thought we were going to have a little amusement in the gardens of the Tuileries. I know of a perfect spot for a meeting—*ça! ça!*" and he lunged twice in quarte at an imaginary adversary. As he came back from the second thrust, he said, "By the way, I must tell you—but here they are," and Ravillac came in, followed by Jacques, Vallon bringing up the rear.

As they entered I recognised in Ravillac the man who was with Jacques and Vallon on the Malaquais, and

Belin, turning to Jacques, said quietly: "Bisson, I am going to lend Ravailac here to your master, to take your place whilst you go away to Ezy. I pledge you my word that he is a good sword."

"True enough, monsieur le comte; we were amusing ourselves with a pass or two below, and he touched me twice to my once, and as your lordship answers for him, I am content."

"That is well, most excellent Bisson! Ravailac, you understand? Here is the Chevalier d'Auriac, your new master, who will remain such until he sends you back to me."

Ravailac bowed without reply. He was quite young, barely twenty, and very tall and thin; yet there was great breadth of shoulder, and I noticed that he had the framework of a powerful man: his appearance was much beyond that of his class, but there was a sullen ferocity in his pale face—the eyes were set too close together, and the mouth too large and straightly cut to please me. Nevertheless, I was practically bound to accept Belin's commendation, and after a few orders were given, the men were dismissed.

"What was I about to say before these men came in?" asked Belin.

"I'm afraid I cannot help."

"Of course not—oh, yes! I recollect. I was about to tell you how I got Ravailac's service. I lay you five crowns to a tester you would never guess."

"You have already told me with your wager. You must have won him."

"Exactly. You've hit it, and it was in this way. About three months ago I was returning to Paris attended but by Vallon, and with only a small sum with me. At

an inn at Neuilly I met an acquaintance, a Baron d'Ayen, one of the last of the *mignons*, and a confirmed gambler.

"I know him," I said, my heart beginning to beat faster at the very thought of d'Ayen.

"Then it makes the story more interesting. We dined together, and then had a turn at the dice, with the result that d'Ayen won every ecu that I had.

"‘It would be a pity to stop now,’ he said, as I rose, declaring myself broken. ‘Suppose we play for your horse, Comte?’

"‘No, thanks,’ I replied; ‘luck is against me, and I have no mind to foot it to my hotel. But I’ll tell you what, I have rather taken a fancy to your man, since I once saw him handle a rapier. I’ll lay Vallon against him; what do you call him?’

"‘Ravillac. He is of Anjouleme, and has been a Flagellant. Will he suit you?’

"‘I shall have to find that out. Do you accept the stakes?’

"‘*Mon ami*, I would play for my soul in this cursed inn.’

"‘Very well, then—throw.’

"The upshot of it was that I won, and from that moment the blind goddess smiled on me, and after another hour’s play I left d'Ayen with nothing but the clothes he stood in. What he regretted most was the loss of his valise, in which lay some cosmetiques he valued beyond price: he got them from Coiffier. I earned his undying friendship by giving him back his valise, lent him his horse, which I had won, and came off with fifty pistoles and a new man. Of course, you know that d'Ayen has fallen on his feet?"

"I do not."

"I'll tell you. Where the devil have you been burying yourself all these months? You must know that the King is looking forward for another Liancourt for a lady whom he destines for a very high place, and d'Ayen is to be the happy man. It is an honour he fully appreciates, and he has been kind enough to ask me to stand as one of his sponsors at the wedding, which by the King's orders comes off in a fortnight."

"And you have promised?"

"Yes, it was a little amusement. They say, however, that Madame is furious, and that her temper is worse than that of Mademoiselle d'Entragues—who, by the way, literally flung herself at the King, without avail. Her time will come soon enough, no doubt—but, good gracious, man! what is the matter! You are white as a sheet."

"It is nothing, Belin—yes, it is more than I can bear. Belin, old friend, is there nothing that can save this lady?"

He looked at me and whistled low to himself. "Sets the wind that way? I did not know you had even heard of the lily of Bidache. Are you hard hit, d'Auriac?" And he rose from his seat and put a kind hand on my shoulder.

I jumped up furiously. "Belin, I tell you I will stop this infamy if I die for it! I swear before God that I will kill that man, king though he be, like a mad dog——"

"Be still," he said. "What bee has stung you? You and I, d'Auriac, come of houses too old to play the assassin. *Croix Dieu*, man! Will you sully your shield with murder? There, drink that wine and sit down again. That's right. You do not know what you say. I have fought against the King, and I serve him now, and I tell

you, d'Auriac, he is the greatest of Frenchmen. And there is yet hope. Remember, a fortnight is a fortnight."

I ground my teeth in silent agony.

"Wait a moment," he continued; "a chamberlain of the court knows most of its secrets, and I can tell you that it is not such plain sailing as you think for d'Ayen. The death of that unhappy Gabrielle has affected the King much. He is but now beginning to recover, and Biron, who was hurrying to his government of Burgundy, has been ordered to remain in close attendance on the King. Whether Biron knew of the King's intentions or not, I do not know; but he has strongly urged the suit of one of his gentlemen for the hand of Madame—it is that *croquemort* de Gomeron, with all his faults a stout soldier. It is said that the Marshal has even pressed de Gomeron's suit with Madame, and that rather than marry d'Ayen, and clinging to any chance for escape, she has agreed to fall in with his views. This I heard from the Vidame and the Chevalier de Lafin—good enough authority."

"One alternative is as bad as the other."

"There is no satisfying some people. Why, man! don't you see it would be the best thing in the world for you if it was settled in favour of our friend from the Camargue."

"That low-born scoundrel?"

"*Mon ami*, we don't know anything about that. Give the devil his due; he is a better man than d'Ayen. I know there is ill blood between you, and wonder that some has not been spilt before now."

"There will be, by God! before this is ended!"

"*Tenez!* Let but the King agree to de Gomeron's

suit—and he is hard pressed, I tell you, for Sully even is on Biron's side in this matter, and after that——”

“What?”

“Henry's mind will have turned another way. There are many who would like to play queen, and few like Mesdames de Guercheville and Bidache.”

“But in any case, Belin, I lose the game.”

“You have become very clever in your retreat, my friend. You win your game if de Gomeron is accepted; and then——”

“And then, my wise adviser?”

“She need not marry the Camarguer. You can run him through under the limes in the Tuileries, wed Madame, and grow cabbages at Auriac ever after. *Pouf!* The matter is simple!”

Miserable as I was, I fairly laughed out at Belin's plot. Nevertheless, the hopefulness of the man, his cheery tone and happy spirit, had their effect upon me, and if it turned out that the King was wavering, there was more than a straw of hope floating down-stream to me. My courage grew also when I put together Sully's words with Belin's news that Biron was detained by the side of the King. It surely meant that this was done to prevent the Marshal doing mischief elsewhere. If so, I was nevertheless on the horns of a dilemma, for by telling of the plot I would, if my story were believed, make matters hopeless, and advance d'Ayen's cause, to the misery of the woman I loved.

On the other hand, by keeping silent I was in an equally hard position. My pledge to Sully prevented me from taking Belin fully into my confidence, and, hardly knowing what I was doing, I poured myself out another full goblet of the Chambertin, and drained it at a draught.

"Excellent," said Belin. "There is nothing like Burgundy to steady the mind; in another moment you will be yourself again, and think as I do in this matter. Courage, man! Pick your heart up! A fortnight is a devil of a long time, and——"

"Monsieur le Baron d'Ayen," and Vallon threw open the door, and at its entrance stood the cold-blooded instrument of the King. He looked older and more shrivelled than ever, but the paint was bright upon his cheeks, his satin surcoat and puffed breeches were fresh from the tailor's, and his hat, which he carried in his left hand, was plumed with three long crimson marabout feathers, held in a jewelled clasp.

"My dear de Belin," he said, bowing low, "I trust my visit is not inopportune? I had no idea you were engaged."

"Never more welcome, baron. I think Monsieur le Chevalier is known to you; sit down and help yourself to the Chambertin."

D'Ayen bowed slightly to me, but I took no notice, and rose to depart.

"I will say good day, Belin, and many thanks for what you have done."

"Do not retire on my account, monsieur le chevalier," said d'Ayen in his mocking voice. "I come to give news to my friend here, which will doubtless interest you. The fact is, his Majesty insists on my marriage taking place as soon as possible, and has given instructions for the chapel in the Louvre to be prepared for the ceremony. You still hold good to your promise of being one of my sponsors, de Belin?"

"If the wedding comes off—certainly."

"Ha! ha! If it comes off! I would ask you, too,

monsieur," and he turned to me, "but I know you have pressing business elsewhere."

"Whatever my business may be, monsieur, there is one thing I must attend to first, and I must request the pleasure of your company to discuss it."

"Ah!" he said, stroking the marabout feathers in his hat, "that difference of opinion we had about the woods of Bidache, eh? I see from your face it is so. I had almost forgotten it."

"Monsieur's memory is convenient."

He bowed with a grin; "I am old, but shall take care not to forget this time——"

"Come, gentlemen," and Belin interposed, "the day is too young to begin to quarrel, and if this must come to a meeting allow your seconds to arrange the time and place. One moment, baron," and taking me by the arm he led me to the door. "*Malheureux!*" he whispered, "will you upset the kettle! See me to-morrow, and adieu!" He pressed my hand and I went out, preceded by Vallon, who must have caught Belin's words, but whose face was as impassive as stone.

CHAPTER XI.

A SWIM IN THE SEINE.

SWEARING he would be back again in a week, Jacques set out for Ezy within an hour of our return to the Rue des Deux Mondes, and his going had removed one weight from my mind. I knew full well that, unless something beyond his control happened, my business would be faithfully discharged, though I felt I was losing a tower of strength when I needed support most, as I watched him riding along the Malaquais, mounted on the sorrel and leading the grey.

He went out of sight at last, and, now that the momentary bustle caused by his departure had ceased, I had leisure to think of what I had heard from de Belin; and those who have read the preceding pages, and have formed their judgment as to what was my character at that time, can well imagine that I was mentally on the rack.

The trouble with d'Ayen was bad enough, but united to that was Belin's statement, that she—she was prepared, no matter what the consequences were, to give her hand to de Gomeron! Had I been in her place death would have been preferable to me rather than this alternative; and then I thought of the token she had sent back to me—felt that I was being trifled with, and gave full rein to my jealous and bitter temper.

To all intents and purposes I was alone in my

chamber, and yet I could swear that there was an invisible presence at my ear that whispered, "Fooled! Tricked! She is but as other women are, and you have played the quintain for her practice."

By heaven! If it was so, I would end it all at once, and not waste another moment of my life on a heartless coquette! It must be so. It was so. By this time I had got beyond power of reason, and jumped to my conclusions like the thrice blind fool I was. Snatching forth the bow from its resting place over my heart, I tore the ribbons asunder, and flung them on the floor before me, with a curse at the vanity of womankind that could make a plaything of a heart. I would be gone that moment. I would leave this country of intrigue and dishonour. In an hour I could catch Jacques up, and in ten days we would be on the seas, and in that New World, which had not yet time to grow wicked, make for myself a fresh life. By God! I would do it! My hand was on the bell-rope, when there came a sharp tap at the door, and the next moment Ravailac announced in his low voice:

"Maître Palin to wait on Monsieur le Chevalier."

I pulled myself together with an effort, and advanced to meet my old friend as he came in.

"At last! I have been expecting you hourly for some time."

"I could not come, chevalier. I will explain in a moment."

"First sit down. Take that chair there near the window; it commands a good view."

"Monsieur does not need this?"

It was Ravailac's voice that broke in upon us, and he himself stood before me holding out on a salver the ribbons of the torn bow. Civil as the question was, there

was something in his tone that made me look at him sharply. It seemed to me, as I looked up, that a faint smile vanished between his bloodless lips like a spider slipping back into a crevice.

I could, however, see no trace of impertinence in the long sallow face, and the whole attitude of my new follower was one of submissive respect. I fancied, therefore, that I had made a mistake, and put it down to the state of mental agitation I was in at the time.

"No," I answered him; "you can fling it away. And in future you need not ask me about such trifles."

"Very well, monsieur, I will remember," and with a bow he moved towards the door, the salver in his hand.

"Ravillac," I called out after him.

"Monsieur."

"On second thoughts do not throw that away. I did not—I mean, please leave it there on the table."

"Monsieur," and, laying down the salver, he stepped out of the room.

"I see you have changed your livery with your old servant, chevalier," said Palin, sipping at his wine, as the man went out, closing the door carefully and softly behind him.

"Not so. Jacques has merely gone away temporarily on some business of importance. In fact he left to-day, shortly before you came, and this man, or rather youth, has been lent to me by a friend."

"And his name is Ravillac?"

"Yes."

"An uncommon name for a man of his class."

"Perhaps—but these men assume all kinds of names. He is, however, better educated than the usual run of people in his position, and bears an excellent character,

although he has been a Flagellant, from which complaint he has recovered."

"Most of them do. And now, my good friend, let us dismiss Ravailac and tell me how you progress."

For a moment it was in me to tell him all, to say that I had abandoned a worthless cause, and that I could do no more as I was leaving France at once. Mechanically I stretched out my hand towards the tags of ribbon on the table, and my fingers closed over them. What was I to say? I could not answer Palin. Through the now darkening room I could see his earnest features turned towards me for reply, and behind it there moved in the shadow the dim outline of a fair face set in a mass of chestnut hair, and the violet light from its eyes seemed to burn through my veins. My tongue was stilled, and I could say nothing. At length he spoke again.

"Do I gather from your silence that you have failed?"

"No—not so—but little or nothing could be done, as the King has only just come, and then——" I stopped.

"And then—what?"

"It seems that Madame has changed her mind."

"I do not follow you. Do you know what you are saying?" His tone was coldly stern.

My temper began to rise at this. I put down the ribbons and said: "Yes, I think I do—or else why has Madame come to Paris, and what is this story I hear about a Monsieur de Gomeron? If that is true it ends the matter."

I got up as I spoke, and began to pace the room in my excitement.

"Had I been twenty years younger, Monsieur d'Auriac, I would have paraded you for what you have said; but my cloth and my age forbid it. My age, not because it

has weakened my arm, but because it has taught me to think. My young friend, you are a fool."

"I know I have been," I said bitterly, "but I shall be so no longer."

"And, in saying so, confirm yourself in your folly. Are you so beside yourself that you condemn unheard! Sit down, man, and hear what I have to say. It will not keep you long. You can leave Paris five minutes after, if you like."

I came back to my seat, and Palin continued:

"You appear to be offended at Madame de la Bidache's coming to Paris?"

"I am not offended—I have no right to be."

"Well, it will interest you to hear that her coming to Paris was forced. That practically we are prisoners."

"You mean to say that he—the King—has gone as far as that!"

"I mean what I say—Madame cannot leave her hotel, except to go to the Louvre, without his permission."

"But this is infamous!"

"In an almost similar case this was what the daughter of de Coeuvres said, and yet she died Duchesse de Beaufort. But are you satisfied now?"

"I am," I said in a low tone, and then, with an effort "but there is still the other matter."

"You are exacting—are you sure you have a right to ask that?"

Luckily, it was too dark for Palin to see my eyes turn to the tangle of crushed ribbons on the table. How much did the Huguenot know? I could not tell, and after all I had no right to ask the question I had, and said so.

"I have no right, but, if it is true, it means that the affair is at an end."

"If it is true?"

"Then it is not?" My heart began to beat faster.

"I did not say so. Remember that the alternative is Monsieur le Baron d'Ayen."

"There is another."

"And that is?"

"Death."

"We are Huguenots," he answered coldly, "and believe in the word of God. We do not kill our souls."

"Great heavens! man! Tell me if it is true or not? Do not draw this out. In so many words, is Madame de la Bidache pledged to de Gomeron?"

"Most certainly not, but Biron and her nearest relative, Tremouille, have urged it on her as a means of escape. She has, however, given no answer."

"Then de Belin was wrong?"

"If you mean that the Comte de Belin said so, then he had no authority for the statement."

I took back the ribbons from the table and thrust them into their old resting-place, my face hot with shame at my unworthy suspicions.

"Palin," I said, "you were right. I am a fool."

"You are," he answered, "exactly what your father was before you at your age."

"My father—you knew him?"

"Yes—Raoul de Breuil, Sieur d'Auriac, and Governor of Provence. We were friends in the old days, and I owed him my life once, as did also Henry the Great, our King and master—in the days of his youth."

"And you never told me this?"

"I have told you now. I owe the house of Auriac my life twice over, and I recognise in this, as in all things,

the hand of God. Young man, I have watched you, and you are worthy—be of good courage." He stretched out his hand, and I grasped it in silence.

"See here," he continued, "I have come to you like a thief in the twilight, because I have that to say which is for you alone. It is useless to appeal to the King. Our only chance is flight, and we have no one to rely on but you. Will you help us—help Madame?"

"Why need to ask? Have I not already said so? Am I not ready to die, if need be, to save her?"

"You are now," he said, "but I will not press that point. Then we, or rather I, can count on you?"

"To the end of my sword; but does not Madame know of this?"

"Not yet. Should it fall through, there would be only another bitter disappointment for her. It is, moreover, an idea that has but shaped itself with me to-day."

"Where do you propose going?"

"To Switzerland. There we would be safe, and there they are of our faith."

"Remember, Maître Palin, that I am not."

"Look into your own heart and tell me that again at another time. Can you count on a sword or two?"

"If Jacques were only here!" I exclaimed. And then, remembering my new man's reputation, "They say Ravillac is good, and I have a friend"—I bethought me of Belin—"upon whom I think I could rely."

"Better one blade of steel than two of soft iron, chevalier. We must do what we can with what we have."

"When do you propose starting?"

"On the night of the fête at the Louvre."

"And we meet?"

"Under the three limes in the Tuileries at compline."

"I have but one horse at present—we must have more."

"That is not hard—I will settle that with Pantin. He knows the spot exactly, and will have horses in readiness and guide you there, if need be."

"I know it too, and will not fail you. God grant us success."

"Amen!"

There was a silence of a moment, and then Palin arose. "It grows darker and darker," he said; "I must go now—adieu!"—and he held out his hand.

"Not yet good-bye," I said. "I will accompany you to the end of the Malaquais at anyrate. Ho! Ravailac! My hat and cloak!"

There was no answer; but it seemed as if there was the sound of a stumble on the stairs outside the closed door, and then all was still.

"*Diabla!* That sounds odd," I exclaimed; "and 'tis so dark here I can hardly lay hands on anything. Oh! Here they are—now come along."

As I opened the door to lead the way out I saw a flash of light on the staircase, and Madame Pantin appeared, bearing a lighted candle in her hand.

"I was coming to light your room, monsieur," she said.

"It is good of you; but what is my new knave doing?"

"If Monsieur will step towards the loft, near Couronne's stall, he will see that Ravailac is absorbed in his devotions—perhaps Maître Palin would care to see also?"

"Not I," said Palin.

"But, at anyrate, his devotions should not interfere with his duties," I burst out; "it will take but a minute to bring him to his senses. Excuse me for a moment,

Palin—Madame will see you as far as the door, and I will join you there.”

And without waiting for a reply I ran down towards the stables, and on coming there heard the voice of someone groaning and sobbing. Peering up into the darkness of the loft above me, I could see nothing, but heard Ravailac distinctly, as he writhed in a mental agony and called on God to save him from the fires of hell. The first thought that struck me was that the youth was ill, and, clambering up the ladder that led to the loft, I found him there in the dim light, kneeling before a crucifix, beating at his heart, and calling on himself as the most miserable of sinners.

“Ravailac!”—and I put my hand on his shoulder—“what ails you, man? Are you ill?” He turned his face up towards me; it was paler than ever, and he screamed out, “My hour is come—leave me—leave me! Our Lady of Sorrows intercede for me, for I know not how to pray,” and with a half-smothered howl he fell forwards on his face before the crucifix, and, clasping it with both hands, began to sob out his entreaties to God anew. I saw that it was useless wasting further time on him, and that he had been taken with one of those frenzy fits that had before driven him to the Flagellants. I left him, therefore, to come to himself, and muttering that Belin might have told me of this foible, came backwards down the ladder to find that Palin and Madame Pantin had followed me, and were but a few yards away.

“Did you hear?” I asked, as I joined them; “is it not strange?”

“He is wrestling with the enemy,” said Palin. “Let him be.”

"He is a traitor," burst out Annette. "Monsieur le chevalier, I would send him packing to-night."

"I can hardly do that," I said, "and, besides, agony such as that young man is passing through does not mark a traitor."

"As Monsieur pleases," she answered, and then rapidly in my ear, "Were it not for someone else's sake I would let you go your own way. Beware of him, I say."

"*Corbleu!* dame Annette! why not speak plainly? We are all friends here."

But she only laughed mirthlessly, and led the way towards the door.

I accompanied Palin to the end of the Malaquais, speaking of many things on the way, and finally left him, as he insisted on my coming no further. So much had happened during the day, however, that I determined to cool my brain with a walk, and my intention was to cross the river and return to my lodging by the Pont aux Meuniers.

I hailed a boat, therefore, and was soon on the other side of the Seine, and, flinging my cloak over my arm, set off at a round pace, Annette's warning about Ravailac buzzing in my head with the insistence of a fly. As I passed the Louvre I saw that the windows were bright with lights, and heard the strains of music from within. They were as merry within as I was sad without, and I did not linger there long. Keeping to the right of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, I passed by the Magasins de Louvre, and then, slackening my pace, strolled idly down the Rue de St. Antoine. Down this great street it seemed as if the coming of the King had awakened the good citizens to life again, for there were lights at nearly all

the windows, though the street itself was in darkness, except at the spots where a lantern or two swung on ropes stretched across the road, and lit up a few yards dimly around them. A few steps further brought me almost opposite a large house, over the entrance to which was a transparent signboard with a row of lamps behind it, and I saw I had stumbled across More's, the eating and gaming house kept by the most celebrated *traiteur* in Paris. I had a mind to step in, more out of curiosity than anything else, when, just as I halted in hesitation before the door, two or three masked cavaliers came out singing and laughing, and in the foremost of them I had no difficulty in recognising the old reprobate, d'Ayen. Much as I would have avoided a quarrel, it could not be helped, for I had the door, and it was certainly my right to enter. They, however, ranged themselves arm-in-arm before me, and, being in wine, began to laugh and jeer at my sombre attire.

"Does Monsieur le Huguenot think there is a *prêche* here?" said d'Ayen, bowing to me in mockery as he lifted his plumed hat.

I determined to show in my answer that I knew them.

"Let me pass, Monsieur d'Ayen," I said coldly. "We have too much between us to quarrel here."

He knew me well enough, but pretended surprise.

"*Corbœuf!* Monsieur le chevalier, and so it is you! Gentlemen, allow me to present to you Monsieur le Chevalier d'Auriac, with whom I have an argument that we never could bring to a conclusion. We disagreed on the subject of landscape gardening."

It was a hard pill to swallow, but I had made up my mind to retreat. The Edict was fresh; a conflict there

would have meant complete disaster; and there would be no chance for escape, as the passage was getting crowded.

"I remember perfectly," I said, carrying on d'Ayen's feint, "but I am not prepared to discuss the matter now. I must go back to take some notes to refresh my memory."

The man was blown with wine. He thought I feared him, and my words, which roused his companions to scornful laughter, made him do a foolish thing.

"At least take a reminder with you," and he flung his soft, musk-scented glove in my face.

"A ring! a ring!" roared twenty voices, and, before I knew where I was, I was in the centre of a circle in the passage, the slight figure of d'Ayen before me, and the point of his rapier glinting like a diamond—now in quarte, now in tierce.

He was of the old school of Dominic, and came at me with a "*ça! ça!*" and a flourish, springing back like a cat to avoid the return. Had I been taught the use of the small sword by any less master than Touchet it would have gone hard with me, but, as it was, the third pass showed me the game was mine. The din around us was beyond description, for whilst More and his men were struggling to get close enough to separate us, the onlookers kept thrusting the hotel people back, and oaths, shrieks, wagers, screams for the watch, and half-a-hundred different exclamations and challenges were shouted out at once. I had no time to look around me, for, old as he was, my opponent displayed uncommon activity, and I could not but admire his courage. Coxcomb and fool, dishonoured though he was, under his flowered vest was no craven heart, and I spared him once for his age and twice for his spirit. But now came the warning cry of "Watch! the watch!" behind me. D'Ayen thrust low in

tierce; the parry was simple and I pinked him through the shoulder-joint—I could have hit him where I liked at that moment. He dropped his sword with a curse, and I found myself the next moment in a general *melée*, for the watch were using no mild measures to force an entrance, and there was a fine to-do in consequence.

Someone—I know not who—at this juncture cut the silken cord by which a huge ornamental lantern was hung above our heads. It fell with a crash, and in a moment we were in semi-darkness. I took the opportunity to dash forwards, flatten myself against the wall, and, by dint of a little management and more good luck, succeeded in getting within a yard or so of the door. Here, taking my occasion, I made a sudden spring forwards, upsetting a man in front of me, and dashed off down the street. Unfortunately, I was not so quick but that I was seen and instantly pursued by a portion of the watch on guard outside.

There was nothing for it but to run. Fast as I went, however, there were good men behind me, and I could not shake them off, though the streets were in gloom. The worst of the matter, however, was that the watch was being constantly reinforced by amateur guardians of the peace. Everyone who happened to be passing, or heard the noise, seemed to think it his duty to join in the chase, and it was with a fine following that I headed towards the river. Heaven knows how I cursed my folly at having put my nose into More's, and I redoubled my pace as I heard, from the shouts to the right and to the left of me, that I was practically hemmed in, and that my only chance was to take to the river. They were close up to me when I reached the bank a few yards below the Pont aux Meuniers, and without further hesitation I plunged

in, and the bubbling and seething of the water brought the yell of disappointment from the bank faintly to my ears. The set of the stream was towards the opposite shore, and in five seconds I was in pitch darkness, though, looking back over my shoulder as I struck out, I could see, by the lanterns that some carried, the watch and the volunteer brigade dancing with anger at my escape, but none of them dared to follow.

I had to swim with a will, for the current was swift; but at length I reached my own side of the river—drenched, it is true, but safe for the present. When I reached my lodging Pantin opened the door to me.

“*Ciel!*” he exclaimed, as he saw me wet and dripping. “What has happened?”

“I have had a swim in the Seine, Pantin; say nothing about it.”

CHAPTER XII.

MONSIEUR RAVAILLAC DOES NOT SUIT.

IN the excitement attendant in my scuffle with d'Ayen and the subsequent events, ending in my escape from the clutches of the watch, I had for the moment clean forgot Ravaillac's fit of frenzy. I slept profoundly, and towards morning was half awakened by an uneasy feeling that there was someone in the room. This passed away; but a short time after I awoke with a start, and looking around saw Ravaillac bending over some of my things which were lying in a corner of the room. As I looked at him the full recollection of his strange behaviour came back to me, and, a slight movement on my part attracting his attention, he bade me a civil good-morning. He made no mention, however, of his illness, nor did he excuse himself in any way, but set about his duties in a quiet, cat-like manner.

Whilst he moved softly about, I began to piece together the noise of the stumble I had heard outside my door when about to set out with Palin, with Madame Pantin's warning and the scene in the loft. It struck me that his seizure might after all be a blind, and I determined to question the man, and, by watching the play of his features and noting his manner of reply, try and discover if there was anything to show that my idea was correct.

Pretending, therefore, to be unaware of what had passed, I asked:

"How was it you were not in to receive me last night, Ravaillac?"

There was a quick up-and-down movement of the long grey eyes, and he answered:

"I was ill, monsieur; I trust Monsieur le Chevalier is not hurt?"

"Hurt! Why should I be?"

"Monsieur will pardon me, but I thought it possible."

"How so?"

"Monsieur's clothes were dripping wet when I first came in, and his rapier stained full six inches from the point when I drew it out of its sheath to clean it this morning. It looked like an arm-thrust, and I thought——"

"Never mind what you thought. I had a slight affair last night, but was not hurt." It was clear to me that he was trying to carry the war into my country, as it were, by counter-questions to mine. I therefore cut him short, and added:

"Your illness came and went very suddenly. Are you often taken that way?"

"Then Monsieur knows——"

"A great many things, perhaps; but kindly answer my question."

It may have been fancy or not; but it seemed to me that, as once before, I saw the wraith of a smile flit stealthily along his thin lips. He was standing in front of me, holding my rapier, and his eyes were bent down on the polished steel hilt as I spoke.

At first he made no answer, and I repeated my question. This time he looked me full in the face, and the whole expression of the man changed—his cheeks paled, his eyes dilated, his voice took a shrill pitch.

"I cannot tell, monsieur. It comes and goes like the

wind. There is a Fear that falls on me—a Fear and something, I know not what, beside; but all before my eyes is red—red as if it rained blood—and then a myriad of devils are whispering in my ears, and there is no safety for me but the cross and prayer. It has passed now—God be thanked! Will Monsieur not take his sword?”

His voice dropped again to its low, soft note as he ended, and handed me my rapier. I buckled it on, thinking to myself, “My friend, you are either a lunatic at large or a finished actor. In either case you won’t do for me.” I said no more, however, but when he gave me my hat he asked:

“Will Monsieur require me in attendance?”

“Yes. I go to the Hôtel de Belin, and I trust this will be the last of your attacks whilst you are with me. The Comte told me you had been a Flagellant, but had recovered.”

“I have been well for a long time, monsieur,” he answered, taking my humour—“I will try and get ill no more.”

“I am glad of that. Saddle Couronne. I go out at once—you can follow on foot.”

“Monsieur.”

The next moment he was gone, and I heard him running down the stairs. It would take a few minutes to get Couronne ready, but I followed him down at once, as I had an inquiry to make from Madame Pantin. I heard someone moving below in the kitchen, and, thinking it was dame Annette, called down the winding stair:

“Madame—Madame Pantin!”

“Madame is out; but is there anything I can do for Monsieur?” And the notary appeared below, a dim out-

line, clad in his dressing-gown, with a woollen cap on his head.

I went down to him and asked:

"Pantin, do you know if Ravaillac was out last night?"

"I would have told Monsieur there and then when he came in from his swim in the Seine. No, for I watched and saw him sleeping in the loft."

"Are you sure?"

"As I am of being here."

"Thanks! Madame is out early?"

"She has gone to the Rue Varenne; but, monsieur, be careful of that Ravaillac."

I nodded my head, and then, raising my voice: "I dine at the Two Ecus as usual—good day!"

"Good day, monsieur!"

Couronne was at the door, Ravaillac at her head, and, mounting, I went at a walking pace towards the Pont au Change, my servant a yard or so behind. It was my intention to see de Belin, to ask him to find out if I was in any danger owing to last night's folly or misadventure—call it what you will—and to beg his advice on the course I was to pursue.

I had been recognised by d'Ayen. My name was known to those with him, and any trouble with the Hôtel de Ville meant hopeless disaster. I had almost made up my mind to conceal myself somewhere until the day of flight; but, before taking any action, thought it advisable to consult my friend, and to return Ravaillac to his service.

On my way to the Rue de Bourdonnais, however, I began to turn the matter of Ravaillac over again in my mind, and found myself between the hedge and the

ditch. If I got rid of him, the man, if he was a spy, could watch me in secret; if I kept him with me, the same thing happened. After all, whilst with me he had greater opportunities, and the less of the two evils was to be rid of him—yes, it would be better so.

Imagine my disappointment when reaching his hotel to find that Belin was out! Vallon begged me to wait, explaining that his master had been absent for so long a time that his return would be but a matter of minutes. He had supped out the night before with de Vitry, the Captain of the Scots Guards, and M. le Grand, had come back late, and gone forth very early in the morning, and it was now full time he was back.

I determined therefore to wait, though every moment was of importance to me, and, after a half-hour of patience in an easy chair, rose and walked towards the window, to while away the time by watching what was going on below. One of the heavy brocade curtains was half drawn, and without thinking of it I came up towards that side, and looked out from behind its cover. It struck me as strange that my horse was without the gate, instead of being within the courtyard, and Ravailac, with the reins thrown over his shoulder, was engaged in converse with a cavalier whose back was turned to me, and whose head was entirely concealed by his broad-brimmed hat and long plumes.

But the tall, straight figure, with its stretch of shoulder, could not be mistaken. It was de Gomeron to a certainty, and my doubts on the point were soon at rest. Keeping as far as possible within the shadow of the curtain, I watched them for full five minutes whilst they conversed together earnestly, and then something changed hands between them. Finally, the cavalier left

Ravaillac with a nod to his salute, and crossed over to the other side of the road, where a mounted lackey was holding his horse. As he gained the saddle, he turned his face towards me for an instant. There was no shadow of doubt left. It was de Gomeron, and it was clear that there was more between the free-lance and Ravaillac than there should be, and also I was convinced, I know not how, that what had passed between them touched me, and was not for my good. What object the man had to play traitor I cannot say; but I do know that there are some natures to whom double dealing is as their skin, and whom nothing can turn from falsehood and chicane.

Be this as it may, I knew at anyrate the grass where one viper lay, and made up my mind to blunt his fangs without any further delay. I gave de Belin another half-hour, and then, calling Vallon, left a message with him, begging my friend to see me at my lodging on a matter of the utmost moment. As soon as I was in the saddle, I bent forwards, and, looking Ravaillac full in the face, said: "My friend, you have too many acquaintances for my service; I return you from this moment to Monsieur le Comte."

"I do not understand, monsieur," he began to stammer; but I cut him short.

"I spoke clearly enough. I do not require your services further. You are discharged. Take this," and flinging him a couple of gold pieces, which the scoundrel swooped at like a hawk, I turned the mare's head and trotted off.

I made a short cut down a side street, and, in so doing, had an opportunity of taking a last look at my

man. He was standing talking to Vallon, and moving his hands in my direction.

"Reeling out lies by the dozen," I muttered to myself. "If I mistake not, there will be another place lost to you by sundown."

I let myself in by the stable entrance, and, after attending to Couronne, entered the house. There was apparently not a soul within. I sought the lower apartments in the hope of finding either the notary or his wife, to explain to them my action in regard to Ravailac; but neither of them was visible. There was no answer to my call. There could not be a soul in the house.

I determined, therefore, to go up to my room and await de Belin's coming, and on my opening the door of my sitting-room saw, to my surprise, a man apparently dozing in my armchair. The noise of my entrance awoke him. He jumped up, and I recognised my friend.

"Belin! what good wind has blown you here? But how did you come in? There is no one in the house?"

"There was when I came in, my friend. Do you know"—and he looked me in the face—"You have made a mess of things."

"You know already! Belin, I have just been to see you about it. The whole affair was forced on me."

"Partly. It was lucky I was there, and sober enough to think of cutting the cord of the lamp. You vanished, as I thought you would, and I have been attending to your affairs since then; any other man would have been laid by the heels ere this, but the stars fought for you."

"Any other man who had not a friend like you, Lisois. But do you really mean that I am safe from arrest?"

"I think so, from any count under the Edict of Blois; but I had a devil of a dance. First of all, the catch-poles insisted upon turning their attentions towards me, and I only got off on the testimony of M. le Baron, who after all is but scratched, though spoiling for revenge. Then I rushed off to de Villeroi; but he, full of his new office as governor of the Hôtel, hummed and hawed—would hear of nothing, he said, until you were provided with a lodging in Fort l'Eveque, and talked big of the law and its course. However, I had an argument to persuade him: little birds twitter odd things into the ears of a chamberlain, sometimes, and he agreed to hold over the matter for a few hours until I had seen the King."

"The King!"

"Why not, *mon ami*? With the first streak of light I went to see a friend who shall be nameless, but is a power in the land. An hour later I was at the Louvre and at his Majesty's bedside. Henry was in high good humour. He had won nine thousand crowns last night from the invincible Portuguese, de Pimental. Almost as great a victory as Arques, he said. I related the whole of the circumstances without mentioning your name, and, pledging my word that d'Ayen would be about by this afternoon, begged for a pardon."

"But the King of course asked for my name."

"Of course he did, and, in reply, I said I would bring you in person to the Louvre this afternoon: then by good chance Sully himself came in. His lands of Muret march with mine, and Monseigneur is my very good friend. The King began to put him the case, to which Sully listened without a movement, except an occasional glance at a roll of documents in his hand, and when Henry finished said, with a smile—

“A trifle, sire, that may well be left to M. de Villeroi; perhaps, however, sire, your Majesty might agree to de Belin's petition. There is a spice of mystery about it, which even interests me. I have, however, brought these papers on the Gabelle.”

“*Diab!e!* Salty, but hardly a relish—let it be as you wish, Belin; and now for my salt without any soup.’ I took the hint, as may be imagined, and went straight back to Villeroi, and the matter being now in the hands of the King, he will of course take no action.”

“You have been goodness itself.”

“My dear fellow, let that rest! All that you have to do now is to come with me this afternoon, put your case to the King, and I lay a hundred crowns to a tester you hear no more—of the little affair of last night.”

As he said this, looking me full in the face, with a peculiar stress on the last words of his speech, a sudden light came upon me. Sully's lands marched with those of de Belin. They were friends. Sully did not, for reasons of his own, wish it known that he took an interest in my mission, and the rest was easy to guess.

“*Pardieu!* That little thrust through the sword arm of M. le Baron is, after all, not so unlucky—eh! Belin? At least, for our very good lord of Muret and Villebon.”

But Lisois only laughed in reply, as he said: “Add a cat falling on its feet from a church steeple to your scutcheon, d'Auriac. Shall I get Rouge Croix to prick the new coat of arms?”

“As you will; you have made my heart, which was heavy as lead, light once more—I feel now that I am not playing a hopeless game.”

“The proper feeling to have, whatever the hazard be.

With all your northern blood, d'Auriac, you should not have so many nerves."

"You forget my mother was of the south."

"True, of the Foix Candale. You will die a Huguenot. But I must be going. Meet me at the Rue de Bourdonnais at one, exactly, and I will take you to the Louvre, and now good-bye!" He rose and gave me his hand.

"But, surely, there is no need for you to go now? Dine with me at my ordinary; I have much to tell you."

Tap! tap! tap! It was dame Annette's little knock at my door, and I knew it was something of import that had brought her to my room.

"One moment, Belin!" and, opening the door, I saw Madame Pantin standing there in breathless agitation.

"What is it, madame? Come in, and speak freely; there is only my friend the Comte de Belin here."

"It is nothing, monsieur," she said loudly, and then, dropping her voice to a whisper, "Ravillac was out last night. Pantin was deceived. I have come up to tell you so at once: be rid of him. I am asked to tell you this by a friend."

"A hundred thanks! I have parted with him, and he will not trouble us more. But who is this friend who takes so great an interest in me?"

"You have company, monsieur," she answered, with a bobbing courtesy, "I will not intrude longer." And, without another word, she turned and went away.

When I looked back, Belin was smoothing the plumes in his hat and laughing. "I heard every word, d'Auriac. So Ravillac is a mouchard, is he? And you have sent him back to me."

"I have," I answered, and then I told my friend what had happened.

His face was grave enough when I ended.

"So that explains one thing," he muttered to himself, tapping the point of his boot with the end of his sheathed rapier, and then, looking up, said slowly, "You were right, and he shall sleep in Fort l'Eveque to-night. No, I cannot stay. Be punctual—and see here." He came close up to me, and rested his hand on my shoulder.

"Though you do not know it, your game forms part of a bigger game played for higher stakes. There are those who love France, and would have no more madness such as that over poor Gabrielle—we are helping you with heart and soul. Be punctual—and adieu. No, I can go out by myself; do not trouble to come down."

He was gone, and I paced up and down for a quarter of an hour, feeling like a pawn that some unseen hand was moving hither and thither on the chessboard of intrigue. And then I went to my solitary dinner at the Two Ecus.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LOUVRE.

It wanted full ten minutes to the hour when I rode through the gates of the Hôtel de Belin, and a moment or so after was with my friend. He was standing in the great hall as I entered, in the midst of a small but brilliantly dressed group of cavaliers. On my being announced, however, he came forward to meet me with outstretched arms.

"*Pardieu!*" he exclaimed, stepping back a half-pace after our greeting, "so you have dropped the Huguenot?"

We poor devils will have but a bad time of it if you turn courtier."

"Is that likely?" I asked, a little bitterly, and then, in a low tone, "have you made Ravailiac safe?"

"He has made himself safe," he whispered "he is gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes—vanished. It is, perhaps, best so. We will discuss him later," and, raising his voice, "come, let me present you to my friends, and he led me up to his companions, who, gathered in a little knot near the huge fireplace, stood surveying us with a well-bred curiosity.

"Gentlemen, permit me to introduce my old comrade, the Chevalier d'Auriac—the Duc de Bellegarde, whom we all call M. le Grand, the Vicomte de Vitry, the Seigneur de Valryn, and the Chevalier d'Aubusson, who, like you, d'Auriac, is new to the court."

"And who is delighted to meet with an old acquaintance, and trusts that M. de Preaulx is in as good a way."

"As the company from Paradise—eh, chevalier?" I put in.

"Fairly hit," exclaimed the lieutenant, and then he must needs tell the story of our little adventure, at which there was much laughter, and it was easy to see that the Marshal and Zamet had no friends in the Rue de Bourdonnais.

"Come, gentlemen," said de Belin, "if we delay longer we shall miss the cinque-pace—one health round, and let us start."

As he spoke, a number of long-necked glasses filled with the wine of Champagne were brought to us. Holding his glass high above his head, de Belin called out:

"Gentlemen—the King."

The toast was drunk with a cheer in which my voice alone was still; but I joined with the others in shivering my glass to fragments on the white marble of the floor, and then a gay, laughing crowd, we took horse for the Louvre.

As we trotted along, I could not help wondering to myself at my own outward gaiety, and whether the same bright mask covered thoughts as dark as mine in my companions' hearts. Who, on looking at de Belin and hearing the frivol of his talk, or on casting a glance at the red and honest face of de Vitry, would imagine that these men were hilt-deep in the intrigues of the court? Perhaps the stately Bellegarde, the cynical lord of Valryn, the Thersites of his day, whose ribald tongue had silenced even de Sancy, and that devil-may-care d'Aubusson, were up to the elbows in the same pie!

Absorbed for a moment or so in these reflections I became silent, and was only aroused by Bellegarde riding up alongside of me and calling out—

"A tester for your thoughts, chevalier, and three hundred pistoles for your nag."

"My thoughts would be expensive at that price, duc, and the pistoles will not buy Couronne."

"*Morbleu!*" Then name your own price. 'Tis just such a horse as that I have dreamed of to lead the King's House against M. de Savoye."

"I may need her for the Italian war myself, monseigneur. No, Couronne is not for sale. She bears too heavy a stake for us to part."

Bellegarde looked at me curiously on my speech, and half repented of my last words; but he said no more

and a second or so later we were past the Magasins and approaching the main entrance to the Louvre.

The sight before us was gay beyond description. All the good commons of Paris had thronged to see the court reopen, and to catch a glimpse, and perhaps a wave of the hand, from the King, whom they now loved with their whole hearts. They came all in their gayest, and as the cheerful crowd swayed backwards and forwards beyond the long line of guards that kept the entrance to the palace free, it was for all the world like a bank of flowers stirred by the wind.

But it was not the commons alone that had gathered there. From within the palace itself we caught the continual flashes of silvered armour, the sheen of silk and satin, the waving of plumes and the glitter of jewels, and, far as the eye could stretch along the river-face, there was an apparently endless cavalcade approaching the Louvre. In that great heaving crowd, wherein all the strength of France was gathered, we saw, as the wind caught the banners and spread them to the sunlight, that there was hardly a house in France but was represented here, from the lordly seigneurs of Champagne and Guienne, with their splendid followings, to the poor knights of Gascony and Bearn, who had not a tower that was not in ruins amongst them, and could barely maintain the brace of starveling lackeys that rode at the heels of each of these lean-pursed but long-sworded gentlemen. Here one saw the white shield of Couci, the lilies of Conde, the griffins of Epernon, there the cross of Croye, the star of d'Andelot, the red hand of d'Auvergne, and the black wolves on the golden shield of La Roche-Guyon, the proudest lord of Burgundy, who traced his descent far back into the mists beyond the middle ages.

Absorbed as I was in my own troubles, I could not restrain a feeling of pride that rose within me at the scene. Down through that roaring crowd that cheered them again and again as they passed, it was as if all the old historic names of France had gathered to do honour to the day. And I felt, too, as I looked at the endless sea of heads, that this was no longer a France at murderous war with itself, but a united and powerful nation that was being led onwards to its destiny by the strong hand of a man who had quenched a fratricidal struggle; and for the moment I forgot how small he could be who was yet so great.

I had yet to learn how great he could be; and here, as I write these lines in my study in the watch tower of Auriac, round which the sea-gulls circle and scream, my old eyes grow dim, and I lay down my pen and wonder for a moment at His will, which did not shield that brave heart from an assassin's blow.

The throng was so thick that for a time we were unable to gain a passage, and were compelled to go at a walking pace, and Belin, reining in his fretting beast, exclaimed, "Faith! 'tis the largest gathering I have ever seen."

"All France is here to-day," said de Valryn. "There go d'Ossat, and his Eminence fresh from the Quirinal."

"I wonder d'Ossat did not win his red hat as well as Monseigneur of Evreux," said de Vitry.

"Ah! he is so unlike the Cardinal," replied de Valryn.

"How do you mean?"

"In this way. His Eminence deceives but he never lies; the Bishop, on the other hand, lies, but he never deceives."

"It would cost you your regiment if the King heard that, de Valryn."

"On the contrary, I am sure it will get to his ears, and then I could almost hope for the vacant bâton, though 'tis said that is already in Ornano's hand—see, there is the Constable's banner!"

"And Bouillon too—the stormy petrel is back from Sedan—I almost sniff war in the air."

"Oh, he has taken to himself a wife—See! He has quartered the arms of La Marck on his scutcheon."

"*Si dieu ne me vult, le diable me prye,*" said d'Aubusson, reading the scroll on the banner of Turenne; and then, the crowd giving way for a moment, we took the opportunity and passed through the gates of the Louvre. So full did we find the Petite Galerie on our entrance, that it was impossible to see or to observe who was there, and all that I was conscious of, as I slowly made my way forwards at the heels of de Belin, was the sound of music, the murmur of voices, and the rippling of gay laughter. In front of us was the noble stairway that led to the Galerie d'Apollon, and between the silent and statue-like figures of the King's House who lined the steps, and who still wore their violet sashes in token of mourning for the death of Gabrielle, there seemed an endless train of men and women advancing upwards. Amongst the jewelled clusters of fair and dainty dames, my eye sought in vain for the face of Madame; but my glance was, for the moment, arrested by the graceful figure of the celebrated La Noirmoutiers, as, with one arched and scarlet-shod foot resting on the white marble of the topmost step of the stairway, she turned to address some laughing remark to the cavalier who was her escort. I had not seen her since I was a boy of fifteen; but years had not changed

her—her eyes were as lustrous, her cheeks as pink and dimpled as when she trailed the honour of Lorraine in the dust, and broke the heart of Joyeuse. I could not restrain a feeling of pity for the man upon whom she was now turning the light of her cruel beauty, for there was that in his honest eyes that showed he would do for her what Mornay, what Joyeuse, what Francis of Lorraine had done.

“Who is the man?” I bent forward and whispered to de Belin.

“Poor de Réthelois, who held La Fère so well against us. I fear he will find holding his heart a harder task.”

“He has capitulated already, I think,” I answered, and then she rested one small gloved hand on her escort’s arm and they passed out of sight.

By this time I had collected myself to some degree, and began to try and rapidly rehearse in my mind what I should say when I came face to face with the King, but I am not ashamed to confess that at each attempt I found myself getting more and more hopelessly confused, and finally, dropping the effort, determined to let the occasion find its own words. At last we were on the stairway, and in twenty steps had entered the great hall which Henry had built himself, and which was known as the Galerie d’Apollon. Except for the vacant space round the still empty throne, the full length of its seventy yards was almost as much crowded as the hall below; but here the music was much louder, though the laughter and talk was not less merry and incessant. There was not, of course, nearly so much movement, and the people were more or less gathered in little knots or groups, though there were many gay butterflies flitting from one of these to the other.

“Keep by me,” said de Belin, and almost as he spoke

we came face to face with Tavannes, de Gie, and de Cosse-Brissac, all dressed in the extreme of fashion. Belin saluted coldly, but my heart warmed towards my old comrades in arms, and I stretched out my hand. This de Gie took limply, but Tavannes and de Cosse-Brissac contented themselves with bows of the politest ceremony. The Vicomte de Gie was, however, effusive in speech if chill in manner.

"It is not everyone who could tear a hole in the Edict as you have done, d'Auriac," he said; and then added with a smile, "but who made your cloak? 'Tis a trifle longer than we wear it here."

"It is short enough for me to see the King in," I answered a little crisply.

"The King!" exclaimed both Tavannes and Brissac, a marked interest in their tones.

"My dear fellow," said de Gie, interrupting my reply, "I knew you would fall on your feet; see here," and stepping right up to me, he threw open my cloak slightly with a turn of his wrist, "wear it so, d'Auriac; it shows your cross of St. Denis now." Then dropping his voice, "friend or foe? Are you for the Marshal or the Master-General?"

"I am here for a short time," I replied. "I have come to see the King. I neither understand nor care about your intrigues."

"I understand perfectly, monsieur," he said, falling back, a half-smile on his lips, and, bowing to each other, we passed on in different ways, they down, and I up the hall to join de Belin, who had gone a few paces ahead.

"The King is still in his cabinet," he said, pointing to a closed door, before which a sentry stood on guard. "I go in at once. When I come out let it be the signal

for you to join me. I will then present you; and mind—speak freely.”

“I mean to,” I answered, and with a nod he passed up through the press. I leaned against the pillar near which I was standing and surveyed the crowd. Madame was nowhere there, or else I had missed her. Perhaps it was better so, for did I see her I might be unnerved; and here Bellegarde joined me.

“Do you see her?” he asked.

“See whom?” I answered, with a start and an eager look around.

“*La belle* Henriette. See, there she stands! A little court around her, with the brightest eyes and the sharpest tongue in France. I wager a hundred pistoles she will rule us all some day.”

As events showed, Bellegarde was right, though that concerns not this story. I followed his glance, and saw Mademoiselle d'Entragues surrounded by a group of admirers, with whom she was bandying jest and repartee. I saw before me a tall, slight woman, beautiful in a wicked, imperious way, her eyes as black as night, and her features exquisite, but marred in every line, to my mind, by their look of pride. I never saw her again but once, and that was at Bois Lancy, where the once-powerful Marquise de Verneuil had gone to hide her shame.

It was a pleasanter sight to turn from this girl, who was even then weighing the price of her honour, to the cluster of fair faces around the tabouret of Madame Catherine, the King's sister, now the Duchesse de Bar. Close to the Princess was Mary of Guise, and within a few feet of her were the wives and daughters of Rohan, de Pangeas, de Guiche, and d'Andelot. I did not, of course, know who they were, but Bellegarde pointed them out one by

one, and then suddenly waved his hand in greeting to a man.

"Ah, there is Pimental! one moment, chevalier," and he left me to join his friend. I was again alone, and resigned myself to patience, when a voice seemed to whisper over my shoulder:

"If M. le Chevalier will kindly survey the other side of the room, perhaps he will be equally interested."

I turned round sharply. There was no one whom I could recognise as the person who had addressed me. On the other hand, however, I blessed him in my heart, for not ten feet away was Madame, radiant and beautiful, with Palin by her side, and M. d'Ayen, with his arm in a silken sling, bowing before her. He was pressing the tips of her fingers to his lips when our eyes met, and, drawing away her hand, she made a half-movement towards me. I was by her side in a moment, and as we shook hands she said with a smile:

"So we have met again, chevalier! In the Louvre, above all places!" This with a slight rising of colour.

"I thought I had missed you. I was looking for you everywhere, and had given you up. I of course knew you were in Paris."

"But the Rue Varenne was too distant a land to journey to? Come," she added as I began to protest, "give me your arm and take me there"—she indicated the upper end of the room—"the crush is not so great there. It is frightful here. M. d'Ayen will, I know, excuse me."

Here d'Ayen, who stood glaring at me and biting at the red feathers in his hat which he held in his hand, interposed:

"I was in hopes that Madame would give me the pleasure," he began.

"Another day, perhaps, baron," I cut in rudely enough. "I trust," I added in a kinder tone, "that your arm does not incommode you?"

"It will heal soon," he said in a thick voice, and turned away abruptly.

"He is very angry," Madame said, following him with her eyes.

"That will heal too, I hope. This way is easiest, I think," and I moved onwards with my charge, still, however, keeping an eye on the door of the cabinet.

"Do you know," I said a moment or so later, "I am indebted to an unknown friend for finding out you were here?"

"Indeed!" she replied seriously enough, though her eyes were smiling; "perhaps I ought not to tell you, but I saw you and told Coiffier to let you know I was here."

"Coiffier, the astrologer!"

"Yes—do you not see him there? He is a brother of Pantin, and devoted to my house; a strange man though, and at times I almost fear him."

I looked in the direction she indicated, and saw a tall man, dressed like any ordinary cavalier of the court, except for his cloak, which was of extreme length, and fell almost to his heels. He, however, wore no sword, but held in his hand a small rod of ebony, with a golden ball at the end. This was the celebrated astrologer Coiffier, who had foretold the death of Henry III., and who, it is said, never died, but was taken away bodily by the Evil One. How far this is true I know not, but it was common report when he disappeared for ever.

"He is much unlike Pantin," I remarked; "no one would take them for brothers."

"And yet they are—and Pantin always says he is the younger, too."

And now, as we made our way slowly towards the upper end of the room, I began to get tongue-tied, and Madame, too, said nothing. Finally, I blurted out, "I am to see the King in a few minutes."

She looked down and half-whispered, "God give you success."

"Amen!" I echoed to her prayer.

And then, in a way that people have when their hearts are full of grave things, we began to talk of matters light as air.

"The King is late to-day," Madame said, glancing at the still closed door of the cabinet, near which a curious crowd had gathered; "perhaps the cinque-pace will not come off," she ran on, "Monsieur de Guiche told me that the King was to open it with Mademoiselle d'Entragues. Do you not see her there? That lovely, black-eyed girl, talking to half-a-dozen people at once."

"Is she so very beautiful?"

"What a question to ask! I do not see a woman in the room to compare with her."

"To my mind her profile is too hard."

"Indeed!" Madame's face, with its soft though clear outlines, was half turned from me as she spoke. "I suppose, then, you do not care for her—a man never thinks with a woman in the matter of beauty. But I did think you would admire Mademoiselle."

"Why should I, even supposing she was beautiful? To my mind there are two kinds of beauty."

And here I was interrupted by the sound of cheering

from the Petite Galerie, and the sudden hush that fell on the room. As we moved down to see for whom the crush was parting on either side, we discovered that it was the Marshal himself, and close at his heels were Lafin, with his sinister smile, and a dozen gentlemen, amongst whom I observed the grim figure of Adam de Gomeron. Madame saw the free-lance, too, and then turned her eyes to mine. She read the unspoken question in my look, her eyes met mine, and through her half-parted lips a low whisper came to me—"Never—never."

"They are coming straight towards us," I said, "we will stand here and let them pass," and with her fingers still resting on my arm we moved a pace or so aside. As Biron came up there was almost a shout of welcome, and he bowed to the right and left of him as though he were the King himself. He was then the foremost subject in France, and in the heyday of his strength and power. In person he was of middle height, but carried himself with unexampled grace and dignity of manner. His short beard was cut to a peak, and from beneath his straight eyebrows, his keen and deep-set eyes, those eyes which Marie de Medici said hall-marked him for a traitor, *avec ses yeux noirs enfoncés*, seemed to turn their searchlights here, there, and everywhere at once. His dress, like all about the man, was full of display. He wore a suit of grey satin, a short black velvet cloak held by a splendid emerald and diamond clasp, and carried a hat plumed with white and black feathers. His sword hilt and the buckles on his shoes flashed with gems. As he came onwards, making straight for the door of the cabinet, Coiffier stepped out of the crowd and held him lightly by his cloak. The Marshal turned on him sharply:

"Let me go, I have no time for mummeries." "Very well, my lord, only I should advise Monseigneur never again to wear a suit such as he is attired in at present."

Biron stopped, and we all gathered closer.

"Why, Coiffier?" he asked, in a tone of affected gaiety, but with a nervous manner.

"Because, monseigneur, I dreamed that I saw you early one morning standing, dressed as you are just now, by the block in the yard of the Bastille."

One or two of the women almost shrieked, and a murmur went up from those who heard the words. As for the Marshal, his face grew pale and then flushed darkly.

"You are mad, my friend," he said hoarsely, and then, with his head down, went straight to the door of the cabinet. It seemed to open of its own accord as he came up to it, and, leaving his suite behind, he passed in to the King.

Little did I think of the prophecy until that August dawn, when I stood by the side of the Lieutenant of Montigny and saw the head of Charles de Gontaut, Duc de Biron, and Marshal of France, held up to the shuddering spectators in the red hand of Monsieur of Paris.

"It almost seems as if I shall not have my interview," I said to Madame a minute or so later, when the commotion caused by Coiffier had ceased.

"When were you to go in?" she asked.

"As soon as ever M. de Belin came out to summon me."

"Then here he is," and as she spoke I saw the door open, and Belin looked out. "Go," she said, and then our eyes met and I stepped up to the cabinet.

"Courage," whispered Belin, and I was before the

King. In the first two steps I took on entering the room, I perceived that there had been a scene; Sully was standing against the open window, his back to the light, and gravely stroking his beard. The Marshal was pacing backwards and forwards in an agitated manner, and the King himself was leaning against a high desk, beating a tattoo with his fingers on the veneer.

As de Belin presented me, I bent to my knee, and there was a dead silence, broken only by Henry renewing the quick, impatient tapping of his fingers on the woodwork of the desk. He was, what was unusual with him when in Paris, in half armour, and perhaps in compliment to the King of Spain, for it was the anniversary of the treaty of Vervins, wore the scarlet and ermine-lined mantle of the *Toison d'Or*. In the silence my eyes unconsciously caught the glitter of the collar, and I could almost read the device, "*Pretium non vile laborum*," on the pendant fleece.

"You may rise, monsieur," the King said at last coldly, and added, "and you may speak. It is because I understand that you broke the laws unwittingly that I have for the moment excused you—now what have you to say?"

As he spoke his piercing eyes met me full in the face, and for the moment I could not find words.

"*Ventre St. Gris!*" and Henry picked up a melocotin from a salver that was by him and played with it between his fingers; "you could not have been born under the two cows on a field *or*, else you would have found tongue ere this, M. d'Auriac. You are not of the south, are you?"

"No, sire, though my father was Governor of Provence, and married into the Foix Candale."

"If so, you should be a perfect Chrysostom. What have you to say?"

I had regained my courage by this and took the matter in both hands. "Your Majesty, I will speak—I charge the Marshal, Duc de Biron, with being a traitor to you and to France, I charge him with conspiring——"

"You liar!"

It was Biron's voice, furious and cracked with rage, that rang through the room; but Henry stopped him with a word, and then I went on repeating exactly what is known, and what I have described before. When it was over the King turned to the Marshal, who burst out in a passion of upbraiding, calling God and his own services to witness that his hands were clean, "and is the word of this man to be believed?" he concluded, "this man who was openly in arms against his King, who is known as a brawler in the streets, who is even now trying to win the hand of a royal ward with not a penny piece to line his doublet pockets, who is excluded from the King's Peace—is his oath to be taken before the word of a peer of France? Sire, my father died by your side—and I—I will say no more. Believe him if you will. Here is my sword! It has served you well," and unbuckling his sword the Marshal flung himself on his knees before the King and presented him with the hilt of his blade.

Astonished and silenced by this audacious outburst, I could say nothing, but saw Sully and de Belin exchange a strange smile. The King, however, was much moved. Putting his hands on Biron's shoulders, he lifted him to his feet. "Biron, my old friend," he said, "the oaths of this man and of a hundred such as he are but as a feather-weight against your simple word. Messieurs,

it is because I wished the Marshal to know that I would hear nothing behind a man's back that I would not repeat to his own face that I have allowed M. d'Auriac a free rein to his tongue. In fine, I believe no word of this incredible tale. M. d'Auriac," and he turned to me, "I give you twenty-four hours to quit France, and never cross my path again." And here the reckless Biron interposed hotly, "But I must have satisfaction, sire."

"Is it not satisfaction enough to know that the King believes your word?" said Sully.

"That may do for the house of Béthune, but not for Biron."

The taunt told. It was the one tender point with the great minister. "The house of Béthune," he began.

"Was old with the Ark, duc—we all know that," said Henry; "but truly I know not what satisfaction the Marshal wants."

"If not for me, sire, for my friends. There is M. de Gomeron who has been much wronged too."

"I see, you are coming to the old point again. I tell you, Biron, plainly, and once for all, I will not have it—my word is given to d'Ayen. And now let us go."

When the King had warned me out of France, I had made a half-movement to bow and retire and then glanced round to Belin for a hint as to what I should do. I could not see him, and not knowing whether to leave the cabinet or not, I remained standing irresolutely where I was, and thus was a witness to the little passage described above. As Henry refused Biron's request he, however, at the same time linked his arm in that of the Marshal, and stepped towards the door of the cabinet. Sully followed immediately behind, and I brought up the rear.

In this manner we entered the Galerie d'Apollon, and as we passed in the King looked round and saw me. He stared hard for a moment, and then said in loud tones, "Twenty-four hours is a short time to reach the frontier, M. d'Auriac," and then he turned his back on me.

Everyone heard the words, and I caught de Gie's mocking voice as he spoke to Mademoiselle d'Entragues, "His cloak was short enough to see the King in, I observe," and then there was a feminine titter.

With my heart boiling with rage I made for the stairway. I did not dare to look for Madame. There was enough despair on my face to enable her to read it like a book were she to see me, and I had no doubt she had. I felt I had miserably failed. There was one chance, however, and that was to urge her to instant flight, and I determined to ride straight to the Rue Varenne and there await either Madame's or Palin's return and induce them to adopt this course.

At this moment someone came in my way, and, stepping aside to let him pass, I caught sight of Madame with both de Belin and the Huguenot at her side. She was not three feet from me, and held out her hand saying, "Courage; I know all." I held her small fingers for a moment, and then the ribbon by which her fan was slung to her wrist somehow slipped and the fan fell to the ground. I picked it up, and, on handing it to her, caught a whisper, "Coiffier, to-night," and then with a bow I went on. Ten steps more brought me to the head of the stairway, and Coiffier was standing there. "Would you have your fortune told, monsieur?" he asked.

"Will to-night suit you?" I answered, taking his humour.

"To-night will be too late, monsieur le chevalier. Look in that as you ride home and you will see—and now go."

With a turn of his wrist he produced a small red ball of polished wood and placed it in my hand, and then moved backwards amongst the crowd.

It did not take me five minutes more to find Couronne, but as I turned her head on reaching the gates of the town towards the river face, I heard de Belin's quiet voice behind:

"Not that way, d'Auriac; you come with me."

CHAPTER XIV.

UNDER THE LIMES.

It mattered little to me if I rode a portion of my way back with de Belin, and so I turned Couronne's head as he wished. Before setting off, however, he gave some rapid and whispered orders to Vallon, emphasising them with a loud "Quick, mind you, and do not fail."

"It is not likely, monsieur," answered Vallon, and then set off.

The crowd was as great as ever, and we were compelled to go slowly. Looking for a moment to my right as we went forwards, I saw Vallon making as much haste as he could in the delivery of his message, and I wished to myself that my own stout-hearted knave were with me. One blade such as his was worth a half-dozen hired swords.

It was my intention to leave de Belin at his hotel and make my way as quickly as possible to my lodging, and thence, taking the risk of the King's warning, go

straight to the Rue Varenne and urge Madame to instant flight. My house of cards had come down, a fluttering heap, as the first story was raised, and to my mind there was nothing for it but a sharp spur and a loose rein. I wished, too, for a moment of leisure to examine Coiffier's gift. I had little doubt that it conveyed a message or a warning, and the sooner I got at its contents the better.

In the meantime Belin rode by my side, whistling a march to himself, whilst a couple of lackeys immediately behind us shouted themselves hoarse with an insistent "Way, way for Monsieur le Comte!"

This cry of theirs was being constantly echoed by a Capuchin, who, mounted on a mule, with his hood drawn over his face so as to show little but his eyes and a portion of a grey beard, kept alternately flinging an "Ave!" and a "Way! way!" to the crowd, the while he stuck close to our heels, having evidently made up his mind to follow the old saw—the stronger the company the freer the road.

I know not why it was, but the jingling notes of the tune my friend whistled irritated me beyond measure, and at last, at the corner of the Rue Perrault, I could stand it no longer, and, reining in, held out my hand.

"I must say good-bye here, Belin. We will meet again, and meet in better times, I trust, for me. In the meanwhile let me thank you, my friend. The rest of my business lies in my own hand."

He laughed and said, "Not yet good-bye; and as for your business, there is some of it in Coiffier's wooden ball. I would open that here before you decide to leave me."

"*Morbleu!* You all seem to be determined to speak

to me in riddles. Why can you not say plainly what you mean? And, besides, this is no place to read."

"It is as good as any other. See here, d'Auriac! I slipped out of the King's cabinet as he spoke to you, and told Madame how your affair was progressing. She herself had something to communicate to you. The matter was pressing, and as things stood she could not tell you there. As for your being treated like a pawn, I give you my word it was beyond me to help that. But if you come with me you will learn many things within the hour. In the meantime open the ball, man! It was a lucky thing Coiffier was there."

Without any further hesitation I drew forth Coiffier's gift. It was, as I have said, a hollow, wooden globe, and was made in two parts, which could be joined together or separated by a turn of the wrist. I held it in my hands for a moment or so and then opened it, and had just pulled forth the paper it contained, when by ill chance, as it seemed, the Capuchin, who was urging his mule past us, brushed violently against my horse, with the result that the paper slipped from between my fingers and fluttered to earth. Couronne, after her first start, was steady enough, but the monk's ill-conditioned mule kicked and plunged, bringing him apparently heavily to the ground. He fell exactly over the paper and lay there for a moment, face downwards, resting on one elbow. I sprang down, as much to get the paper as to assist him, but as I did so, he scrambled to his feet with "A hundred pardons, monsieur, for my clumsiness," and then hastily turned and hurried after his mule, which was already many yards ahead, behaving after its kind, and whose speed was not diminished by the sticks, stones, and oaths flung at him; and there was a roar of laughter—a

mob will laugh or hiss at the merest trifles—as the lank figure of the Capuchin sped along in pursuit of his beast and vanished after him down a side street.

Belin himself joined in the merriment, and I picked up the paper, muddy and much soiled. Smoothening it out against the flap of my saddle, I made out the words, “*To-night, under the limes in the Tuileries—at compline.*” There was no doubt about the writing, and, thrusting the precious scrap into my breast-pocket, I remounted. As I did so de Belin said:

“Well, have you changed your plans?”

“Partly, but I think I shall go back to my lodging.”

“Do nothing of the kind as yet. I have asked Pantin to meet us at the Two Ecus, your own ordinary. Vallon has gone to call him. You can give him any orders there. You owe me as much as to yield to me in this.”

It would have been ungracious not to have agreed, and I told Lisois I would go with him.

“Hasten, then! The road is clearer now, thanks to the Capuchin, or rather to his mule. By the way, did you see the monk’s face?”

“No!”

“A pity! I tried to, but failed in the attempt. His voice was familiar to me, and he seemed wonderfully active for an old man.”

“You are suspicion itself, Belin.”

“I have slept with the dogs and risen with the fleas. Harkee, Hubert! And you, Pierre! If you see that Capuchin again let me know at once; keep your eyes open. If you can persuade him to speak to me, it will be worth five crowns a-piece to you.”

“Monsieur’s wishes shall be obeyed,” said both men in a breath, and now finding the road free enough we set

off at a canter, and kept the pace up until almost at the door of the Two Ecus.

As we pulled up at the ordinary and dismounted, Belin exclaimed: "Now for our supper. I am of those who can only fight under a full belt, and I would advise you, d'Auriac—you who will have fighting to do very soon perhaps—to follow my advice, and make the best use you can of your knife."

I laughed out some reply, and then, turning to mine host, ordered refreshment for both man and beast, and directed that our supper should be served in a private room.

"And observe," cut in Belin, "if Maître Pantin arrives, let him be shown up to us at once."

"Monsieur."

Before we went in de Belin asked his men if they had seen any more of the monk, and received an answer in the negative. Bidding them remember his orders on the subject, he linked his arm in mine and we went within.

"You seem in a way about the monk," I said.

"My dear friend, I cannot get it out of my head that I have seen him before, and I don't like a riddle like that to be unsolved."

"This comes of your court intrigues, de Belin. You were not wont to be so."

"Other times, other manners," he answered, a little grimly, and we sat at our table.

How well do I remember that small room in the Two Ecus, with the dark oak wainscoting, the furniture that age had polished, the open window showing the yellow sunset between the high-roofed and many-gabled houses, the red Frontignac sparkling like rubies in our long-

necked glasses, and the deft service of Susette, the landlord's daughter, whose pretty lips pouted with disappointment, because no notice was taken of her good looks by the two cavaliers who supped together, whose faces were so grave, and whose speech was in tones so low as to be heard only by each other. At last we were left to ourselves, and Belin, who had been explaining many things to me that I knew not before, suddenly rose and began to pace the room, saying: "You take the position now, d'Auriac. If not, let me put the points again before you briefly. There are men like Sully, Villeroi, Forget, and I myself, who understand and grasp the King's views, and know that if he has his way France will be the greatest country on earth. On the other hand, Henry is bound by ties of much service rendered to him by men like Sancy, who disgraces his name by plundering the state, and Zamet, who cannot disgrace himself by anything he does. These men, and such as they, exhaust our resources if they do nothing else, and serve the cause of the great nobles, such as Epernon, Turenne, Tremouille, and above all Biron, whose ambition knows no bounds, and who, I am certain, will never be still unless his head is on a crown-piece or else on the block."

"But what has that to do with me?"

"Listen! Great as the King is, he has one failing—you know what it is; and it is on this the Sancys and Birons play. To carry out his own designs it is necessary that Henry should be saved from himself. The Italian embassy is with us, and whilst d'Ossat and the Cardinal performed the ostensible object of their mission, they affected another and secret object—and that was the arrangement of the King's marriage with Marie de Medici."

"The King's marriage!"

"Yes."

"But the Queen still lives."

"And long may she live; but not as Queen."

"Ah!"

"Exactly; you begin to see now. If we can make this move we get the support of the Quirinal, and, more, the help of the Florentine coffers. We will paralyse the great conspiracy which Biron heads—rather a league than a conspiracy. We can dispense with the expensive services of Sancy, of Ornano, and of Zamet, and then Henry will be free to carry out his great designs."

"If, however, Biron is as strong as you say?"

"Permit me—we are providing for that. He has been kept close to the King. Sully, as Master-General of the ordnance, has ordered the guns at Dijon to be sent to Paris with a view of replacing them with new ones. None are going, and by the time that the King's betrothal is announced, Burgundy will be as much Henry's as it is the Marshal's now."

"But he will believe nothing against Biron."

"Other people have nursed vipers before, but the King is not himself now. He can think of nothing but one thing. See here, d'Auriac, I have helped you for two reasons: one, because I love France; and the other, because I love you. Henry has ordered the marriage of Madame de Bidache with d'Ayen to be celebrated to-morrow. He gave that order to-day, to put an end to the importunities of the Marshal in regard to de Gomeron. I know this, and Madame knows it too. In plain language you must play a bold stroke for the woman you love—take her away to-night."

"That was partly arranged—we are to go to Switzerland."

"You will never reach the frontier. Look—there is my castle of Mourmeton in Champagne. It is old and half in ruins. See, here is my signet. Take it, show it to Gringel, the old forester there—he will take you to a hiding-place. Stay there until the affair blows over, and then to Switzerland or elsewhere, if you will; in the meantime I pledge you the faith of de Belin that no stone will be left unturned to effect your pardon."

I took the ring he gave me and slipped it on, and then our hands met in a hearty clasp that expressed more than words. It was at this moment that Susette announced Pantin, and the little notary came in with his quick, short step.

"I am late, messieurs, I know," he said, "but I was not at home when Vallon arrived, or else I had been here sooner."

"You are in ample time for what we want, Pantin," I said, "though there is no time to waste. I am leaving Paris to-night, and will not return to the Rue des Deux Mondes, but start from here. My business concerns the safety and honour of Madame de la Bidache, and when I say that I know I can rely on you. Is it not so?"

"It is, monsieur."

"Well, then, should anyone ask for me, say I have gone you know not where. You do not know, as a matter of fact. If Jacques, my servant, returns, bid him go straight to M. le Comte. He will get orders from him."

"I understand perfectly, monsieur."

"There is yet another thing. Hasten to Maître Palin and bid him await me now outside the Porte St. Denis with two spare horses; he will understand what I mean. And now, my friend, adieu. This will pay what I owe you," and I thrust a half-dozen pistoles into his hand.

But he resolutely refused. "No, no, monsieur le chevalier."

"But dame Annette?" interposed Belin.

"Um!" said the notary, scratching his chin, "that is another matter. I had for the moment forgotten I was a married man. Very well, monsieur, I will take the money—not that I need it, but for the sake of peace; and now there is little time to lose. I go to do all you have asked me to, and rest assured, messieurs, it will be faithfully done."

"I have no doubt of that, Pantin."

"We had better make a start, too," I said, and Belin shouted for the horses. We stayed for a moment or so after the notary's departure, during which time Belin urged me to take Vallon and a couple of men with me to my tryst, but, fearing no complications, I refused, saying that this was a matter that were best done with one hand. Belin would have come himself but that, his friendship with me being known, it was necessary for him to avoid all suspicion of his being in the affair.

"I shall go to the Louvre," he said, "and engage d'Ayen at play. Pimental and others will be there, and, if I mistake not M. le Baron will have a sore head for his wedding," and he chuckled here.

Then I settled the score with mine host, and, mounting our horses, we rode back the way we came. It was at the Magasins that we wished each other good-bye, and, with a last grip of the hand and a last warning to hasten to Mourmeton, Belin turned towards the Louvre, whilst I went on towards the Tuileries, keeping the northern road, and not the more frequented street along the river face. I chose this way because, although it was a little longer, yet there was still a half-hour for my appointment, and it

would not do for me to arrive too early, as by hanging about at the trysting-place I might attract attention, and, perhaps, ruin the game. As I rode on I caught myself wondering if I could play the same hand that Sully, Villeroi, and de Belin were throwing to. I knew they were honest men—their positions removed them from such temptations as might assail even a great noble, and that they were loyally trying to serve their country and their King. If such service, however good its object, meant, as it clearly did, that one must be up to the elbows in intrigue, then I thanked God that I belonged to no party, and inwardly resolved that, whether I won or lost my hazard, the court would see me no more; and as for the King! *Pardieu!* It is not good to know a hero too well.

There was a strong moon, and the night was as clear as crystal. One side of the street was in shadow, illumined here and there by the dim light of a few lanterns set high up in niches in the old and moss-grown walls of the buildings. The houses here were old even for this part of Paris, and, with their sloping roofs and many gables, rose in irregular outlines on either side—outlines, however, so softened by the moonlight, in which they seemed to quiver, that it was as if some fantastic creation of fairy-land had been set down here—a phantom city that would melt into nothingness with the warm rays of the morning sun.

Away in the distance it still seemed as if I could hear the hum of the city behind me, but here all was quiet and still, and the iron-shod hoofs of Couronne rang out with a strange clearness into the night. Occasionally I met a passer on the road, but he or she, whoever they were, took care to give me a wide berth, and once a woman who had opened her door to look out, for some

reason or other, hurried in and shut it with a little cry of alarm as I passed.

I had now come to the gardens of the Tuileries, and, putting Couronne at the wall which was just being raised around them, found myself within a quarter-mile of our place of meeting. The turf was soft and level here, and I let Couronne go at a half-gallop, keeping in the chequered shade of the huge trees, which whispered strange things to each other in the breeze. At this moment it seemed as if I heard the smothered neigh of a horse. I knew the sound well, for often had my old Norman tried to serve me in this way through the scarf by which his jaws were bound together when we lay in ambuscade. With a touch of my hand I stayed my beast and stopped to listen. Beyond me stretched the avenue, at the end of which stood the great lime trees. I could see nothing but the ghostly line of trunks, lit up here by the moon, there standing out black against the night, or fading away into a lacework of leaves and branches. There was no sound except the tinkle of the leaves and the sullen creaking of the boughs overhead. "It must be her horse or Palin's," I said aloud to myself; and then the compline came to me clear and sweet from the spire of St. Germain.

I lifted my hat for an instant with a silent prayer to God for help, and then shook up Couronne. Ere the last notes of the bells had gone I was under the limes. At first I could see nothing; there was no one there; and my heart grew cold at the thought that some danger had overtaken my dear one.

"Madame!" I called out. "It is I—d'Auriac."

Then a figure in a grey mantle stepped out from the

shadow of the trees, and I sprang from the saddle and held out my hand.

"I knew it was you, chevalier," she said, "but I wanted to make certain and waited until you spoke."

"I hope I have not kept you waiting?"

"Indeed, no. I had but just come across from the Louvre when you arrived."

"Then you did not come riding?"

"How could I? I have been in the Louvre, and am expected to be at the *coucher* of Madame Catherine in a half-hour," and she laughed slightly.

The thought of that smothered neigh flashed through my mind like lightning.

"We must trust ourselves to Couronne," I said. "Palin will be at the Porte St. Denis. There is no time to waste; come!"

Then it seemed that she hesitated, and, flinging back her hood, looked me full in the face. In the moonlight I saw her white as marble, and she suddenly put out both her hands, saying:

"I trust you utterly, d'Auriac."

Man is not made of stone, and I loved this woman as my life. There was that in her voice, in the pitiful appeal of its tones, that broke down all my false pride. I cannot say how it happened, but in a moment my arm was round her waist, and I drew her towards me, she nothing resisting.

"Claude, I love you. Give me the right to protect you."

What she said is for my ears alone; and then she lay still and passive in my arms, her head resting on my shoulder.

So for a time we stood in silence, and then I kissed her.

"Come, dear," I said, "and with the morning we shall be safe."

Of her own accord she put her arms about my neck and pressed her lips to mine, and then I lifted my darling to Couronne's saddle bow.

Had I but taken de Belin's offer! If Jacques were but with me then!

My foot was in the stirrup, my hand on the reins, when there was a sudden flash, a loud report, and my poor horse fell forward, floundering in the agony of death.

I just managed to snatch Claude from the saddle, and staggered back, and then with a rush a half-dozen men were on us. They were masked to a man, and made their attack in a perfect silence; but as my sword flashed out of my scabbard I recognised the tall figure of the Capuchin, and thrust at him fiercely, with a curse at my folly in coming alone.

Things like these take a short time in doing, and should take a shorter time in telling. I ran one man through the heart, and with a gasp he fell forwards and twisted himself like a snake round my blade. Then someone flung a cloak over my head—I was overborne by numbers and thrown. Two or three men held me down; there was an iron grip at my throat, and a man's knee pressed heavily on my chest. I made a frantic effort to free myself: the covering slipped from my face, and I saw it was the Capuchin kneeling over me, a dagger in his hand. His mask had fallen from him, and his face was the face of Ravailac!

I could not call out, I was held too tight; and the

villain lifted his poniard to strike, when a voice—the voice of de Gomeron—said:

“Hold! We will put him out another way.”

“This is the quickest and surest,” answered Ravailiac; but the reply was brief and stern.

“Carry out my orders. Gag him and bring him with us.”

“To Babette’s?”

“To Babette’s. There is the oubliette. Quick, there is no time to lose.”

“Oh, ho!” laughed Ravailiac, “that is good! M. le Chevalier will be able to drown his sorrows under the Seine; but he will take a long time to die!”

“You villain!” I gasped, but like lightning the gag was on me, and then I was blindfolded. I could see nothing of Madame, though I tried my utmost to get a glimpse of her. Then I was bound hand and foot, and lifted by a couple of men. After being carried a short space I was thrust into a litter, and as this was done I heard a faint cry from Claude; and I groaned in my heart, for I was powerless to help.

The litter went forward at a jolting pace, and from the echo of hoofs around it I gathered that there were at least a dozen mounted men about me. Sometimes I heard a brief order given by de Gomeron, and the sound of his voice made me certain that Madame was with us. If so, there might still be hope, and I lay still and tried to follow our route by the movement of the party, but I could see nothing; and after a time my brain began to get confused, for we turned this way and that, up side streets, down winding roads, until the thing became impossible.

Once we were challenged by the watch, and my captor gave answer boldly:

"M. de Gomeron, of the Marshal's Guards, with prisoners for the Chatelet; let us pass in the King's name."

I heard the words and strove to call out, but the gag was too secure. At anyrate, I had learned one thing—we were going in the direction of the Chatelet. Who, then, was Babette? I had heard the name once before, on the night that I lay wounded before La Fère, and an inspiration seemed to come on me, and I was certain that the night hag and de Gomeron's Babette were one and the same.

Then we jolted on for about another half-hour—we must have passed the Chatelet by this—when suddenly the litter took a sharp turn to the right, and after going a little way was put to the ground.

"*Sacré nom d'un chien!*" exclaimed one of my carriers, "he is heavy as lead."

"He will be light enough in a week or so," answered someone else; and then I heard the creaking of hinges, and the litter appeared to be borne within a yard and was left there. After a half-hour or so I was dragged out, and I heard a woman's voice:

"This way, my lambs; the gentleman's room is below—very far below, out of all draughts;" and she laughed, with the same pitiless note in her voice that I had heard once before—and I knew it was the murderess.

Down a winding stair we went, and I remained passive, but mentally counted the steps and the turns. There were eighteen steps and three turns, at each of which there was apparently a door, and then we stopped. There was a jingling of keys, the harsh, grating noise of a bolt being drawn back, and Babette spoke again:

"Monsieur's apartment is ready—'tis the safest room

in the Toison d'Or." Then I was flung in heavily as I was, and the door bolted behind me.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HAND OF BABETTE.

I LAY for a time where I had been flung, overwhelmed by the disaster. Then a frenzy came on me, and, but for the gag in my mouth, I could have screamed out curses on my folly in allowing myself to be trapped like a wild cat. Now that I think of it, in the madness of those moments I did not pray to the God who had so often and so repeatedly helped me; yet in His mercy and goodness I was freed from my straits, as will be shown hereafter.

In the meantime I was so securely bound that it was all but impossible to move, and the bandage over my eyes prevented me from seeing anything. I writhed and twisted like a serpent on the wet flags where I lay, and in the violence of my struggles gradually moved the bandages, so that my eyes were at last set free, and then, exhausted by my efforts and half-choked by the gag, I became still once more, and looked around me. For all I could see I might have been as before—I was in blank, absolute darkness. Into the void I peered, but could make out nothing, though I could hear my own laboured breathing, and the melancholy drip, drip of water as it oozed from above me and fell in sullen drops on the slime below.

As I strained into the velvet black of the darkness, it came to me—some fiend must have whispered it—that I was blind. My mind almost ceased to work at the thought,

and I remained in a kind of torpor, trying in a weak manner to mentally count the drops of water by the dull splashing sound they made in falling. Ages seemed to pass as I lay there, and the first sense of coming to myself was the thought of Claude, whom I had lost, and the quick agony of this made my other sufferings seem as nothing. There is a misery that words, at least such words as I am master of, cannot picture, and I will therefore say no more of this.

A little thing, however, now happened, and but for this I might have lain where I was until I died, so entirely impressed was I with the idea that I was sightless. In utter weariness I turned my head on one side and saw two small beads of fire twinkling about a yard or so from me. They were as small as the far-away stars, and they stared at me fixedly. "This is some deception of the mind," I thought to myself, when suddenly another pair of fiery eyes appeared; then there was a slight shuffling, and all was still. But it was the saving of me. Sight and hearing could not both deceive. I knew what they were, and I knew, too, that I was not blind. From that moment I began to regain possession of my faculties and to think of means of escape. In my vest pocket was a small clasp knife. If I could but get at that I could free myself from my bonds. That, at anyrate, had to be the first step. I began to slowly move my arms up and down with a view to loosening the cords that bound me, but, after some time spent in this exercise, realised the fact that the ropes might cut through me, but that they would not loosen. Then it struck me, in my eagerness to be free, that I might get at the knots with my teeth, and by a mighty effort I raised myself to a sitting posture—only to remember that I was gagged, and that it was

of no avail to think of this plan. There are those who will smile, perhaps, if their eyes meet this, and put me down in their estimation for a fool for my forgetfulness. That may or may not be, but I have written down exactly what happened.

Although the new position I had attained did not in any way advance me towards freedom, yet it gave me a sense of personal relief. I was able to raise my knees a little, and sitting down thus, with my body thrown a little forward, to ease the strain of the cords, I began to think and go over in my mind the whole scene of the tragedy from the beginning to its bitter end. I had no doubt as to the personality of Babette. I was not likely to forget her voice. I had heard it under circumstances that ought to have stamped it on my memory for all time, and if I had the faintest doubts on the matter, they were set at rest by the fact that she was so well known to de Gomeron—she probably had been a camp-follower on our side—and also by the still more damning fact that her house was known as the *Toison d'Or*. The name had been distinctly mentioned by her, and its meaning was clear to me when I thought of the dreadful scene over de Leyva's body.

As for de Gomeron, I knew him well enough to understand his game. The whole affair, as far as he was concerned, was a sudden and rapid resolve—that was clear. I argued it out in this way to myself, and, as I went on thinking, it was almost as if someone was reading out a statement of the case to me. It was evident that the free-lance was to the last moment in hopes that the King would yield to Biron's intercession on his behalf. When that was refused he may have had some idea of gaining his end by force, but was compelled to hurry his

coup by the knowledge that he had obtained from his confederate or spy, Ravailac.

It had worked out well enough for him. My disappearance, my dead horse—poor Couronne!—all these would point to me as the author of the abduction, and give de Gomeron the time he wanted to perfect his plans. The man I had run through would never tell tales, and, so far, the game lay in the Camarguer's hands.

And then about Madame. As I became calmer I saw that for his own sake de Gomeron would take care that her life was safe—at anyrate for the present, and whilst there was this contingency there was hope for her, if none for me, as I felt sure that, what with the King and Madame's relatives of the Tremouille on one hand, and Sully and de Belin on the other, things would go hard, sooner or later, with de Gomeron, whatever happened to me.

By the time my thoughts had reached this point I was myself again, and the certainty with which I was possessed that Claude was in no immediate danger of her life gave me strength to cast about for my own liberation as the first step towards freeing her.

But my despair almost returned as I thought and thought, until my brain seemed on fire, without my efforts bringing me a ray of hope. I shuddered as I reflected that it was part of de Gomeron's scheme to let me die here. It could easily be done, and a few bricks against the wall would remove all traces of the living grave of d'Auriac. In my mental excitement I seemed to be able to project my soul outside my prison, and to see and hear all that my enemy was plotting.

I do not for a moment say I was right in every detail, but events showed that I was not far wrong; and it is a

wonder to me that the learned men of our day have not dealt with this question of the mind, though, to be sure, it savours no little of those secrets which the Almighty in His wisdom has concealed from us, an inquiry into which is perhaps a sin—perhaps in some future time these things may be disclosed to us! Whether I am right or wrong, I know not. I have, however, set down faithfully what passed through my mind in those hours of agony.

Was I never to see the light again? Never to hear another human voice? Was I to come to my death in a long-drawn-out agony? Dear God, then, in mercy, strike me dead! So I prayed in my utter desolation; but death did not come, though its mantle of darkness was around me.

Hour after hour passed. I shifted my position, and, strange to say, slept. How long I slept I know not; but I woke stinging with pain, and found this was due to my being bound as I was, and in a little the agony became almost insupportable; and I was on the verge of going into a delirium, only righting my failing senses by a mighty effort of will.

I had lost all count of the time, but guessed it was advanced in the day by this; and my eyes had become so accustomed to the darkness that I could manage to see the faint outlines of the cell in which I was imprisoned. I tried to make out its extent with an idle and useless curiosity, and then, giving it up as utterly hopeless, leaned my head on my upraised knees, and sat thus waiting for the end.

I longed for death to come now—it would be a happy release from my pain.

Suddenly there came a grating noise as the bolts outside were moved. Then the door of the cell swung open

with a groaning, and there was a blinding flash of light that, for the time being, deprived me of the powers of sight, though, with a natural instinct, I shut my eyes to the flash as it came.

Then I heard de Gomeron's voice saying, "Remove the gag—I have something to ask Monsieur."

As I felt two cold, hard hands fumbling with the knots of the gag, I managed to open my eyes, though the light still pained me, and saw the tall figure of the free-lance, his drawn sword in his hand, standing in the open doorway, and kneeling beside me was Babette. The hag caught the loathing in my glance, and laughed to herself as she wrenched at the knots, and de Gomeron, who was evidently in no mood to delay, hurried her efforts with a sharp "Quick!"

"It is done," she answered, and rose to her feet, swinging the silken bands of the gag she held in her hand.

"Then have the goodness to step back whilst Monsieur d'Auriac and I discuss the position."

Babette did as she was bidden, muttering something, and de Gomeron, advancing a pace, addressed me—

"Monsieur, I have come to make you an offer, and I will not waste words. I am playing to win a desperate game, and I shall not hesitate to play any card to win. My offer is this. I ask you to sign a formal document, which I shall bring to you, holding me guiltless of any design against either you or Madame de la Bidache. In return I will set you free in ten days after you sign this paper. During that time you must consider yourself my prisoner; but you will be better lodged than now. Should you refuse to accept this offer, there is nothing left for me but to leave you here to die."

He spoke in slow, measured accents, and the vault of the roof above me gave back the man's words in a solemn echo. The light of the lantern stretched in a long yellow shaft up the spiral stairway beyond the door, and, half in this light and half in shadow, stood the witch-like figure of Babette, leaning a little forward as if striving to catch each word that was spoken.

In the silence that followed the free-lance's speech I could almost hear the blood throbbing in my temples; and for the moment I was deprived of all power of words. It was not from fear, nor from any idea of accepting the offer, but a thought had come to my mind. I would oppose craft with craft, and meet the fox in the skin of a fox.

"Give me twenty-four hours to decide," I answered, "and free me from these cords. I cannot think for the pain of them."

"*Pardieu!*" he laughed. "The knots have been well tied; but twenty-four hours is a long time."

"Yet you are willing to accommodate me for ten days, better lodged. *Ventrebleu!* M. de Gomeron! Do you think I can scratch my way out of this?"

He did not answer me, but stood for awhile biting at the ends of his thick moustache. Then he suddenly called to Babette, "Cut the cords."

She came forward and obeyed. Words cannot convey the sensation of relief as the cords fell from me, but for the time being so numbed was I that I was powerless to move.

"You have your desire, monsieur," said de Gomeron, "and I await your decision. It will save me trouble if you inform Babette whether you agree or not. In the former event we shall have the pleasure of meeting again;

in the latter case I take the opportunity of wishing you as happy a time as a man may have—in the future life. In the meantime I will see that some refreshments are sent to you. *Adieu!*”

He turned and stepped out of the cell and stood for a moment whilst Babette picked up the lantern and followed him.

“Monsieur will not want the light to aid him to think,” she laughed, and then the door was shut. I heard the sullen clank of the chain, the turning of the great keys, and I was alone and in darkness once more.

Dark it may have been, but, thank God! I was no longer like a trussed fowl, and betook myself to rubbing my numbed limbs until finally the chilled blood was warmed and I was able to stand, and then, in a little, I gained strength to grope my way backwards and forwards in the cell as an exercise. No thought of ever agreeing to de Gomeron’s terms ever crossed me. I had, however, resolved to make a dash for freedom when he came to me again. I should pretend to agree, and then win or lose all in the rush. Anyway, I would not die here like a rat in a trap. I almost chuckled to myself as I thought I was in a fair way to outwit the free-lance. He was a fool after all, though, at the same time, I could not but admit that his move to get me to admit his innocence was a skilful one. Still, it was a plot that might overreach itself. My captors had eased me of my belt, which was so well stuffed with pistoles. They had not, however, had time or opportunity to search me further, and had left my clasp-knife, which lay in my pocket, as I have said, together with a dozen or so of gold pieces I had kept there to be at hand. I pulled out the knife and, opening it, ran my fingers along the blade. It was

three inches or so in length, but sharp as a razor, and with it one might inflict an ugly wound in a struggle. I mapped out my plan mentally. When de Gomeron came again I should fell him as he entered, arm myself, if possible, by snatching his sword, and then cut my way out or be cut down. I had no doubt that I might be able to effect the first part of the programme. In those days I was as strong as a bull, and there were few men, especially if they were unprepared, who could have stood a blow from me. It was in act two that I might come to grief. At anyrate, it would be a final and quick ending to the business, not the long-drawn-out agony I would otherwise have to endure. Now that I think of it, it was a poor enough plan, and it was lucky that, under Providence, another way was shown to me. Such as it was, however, it was the only thing that occurred to me at that time, and it would not be for want of effort on my part that it would fail. The more I thought over it then, the more I was convinced that it was my sole chance, and I grew impatient for the moment when I should put my design into execution. Twenty-four hours was long to wait, and I raved at myself for having fixed such a time. *Morbleu!* I might have had the sense to make it five, or three, or two hours! I little guessed, as I paced the cell impatiently, how many hours had passed since de Gomeron left me, and that it was impossible to measure time in that loathsome dungeon. As I sat brooding, the profound silence was once more suddenly disturbed by the sudden jarring of a bolt. It was not, however, the door of my cell that was opened, but a little wicket about a foot square, and through this there flashed again a blinding light, and the face of Babette peered in. So malign was its aspect that I shuddered in spite of my-

self, and then, in a fury I could not control, shouted out:

"Out of my presence, hag! Begone!"

"Oh! ho!" she laughed. "A time will come when Monsieur will go on his two knees and pray to Babette—to good Babette—to kind Babette! In a day or so it will be thus," and she laughed shrilly. "But I go as you wish, to carry your refusal to the Captain."

She made a movement as if to go, but, cursing myself at very nearly having spoilt all, I burst out, "Stay!" and she looked back.

"Monsieur!" She grinned through the wicket.

"See here," and in my eagerness my voice was hoarse and thick; "five hundred crowns if you free me from this, and a thousand more if you will do the same for Madame."

"Will Monsieur add a palace in the moon to this?"

"I give you the word of d'Auriac. Fifteen hundred crowns is a fortune. They will be yours in six hours from the time you free us. Think of it—fifteen hundred crowns!"

Never have I seen avarice blaze so in a face as in hers. As I dropped out the last words, she shook her head from side to side with a swaying motion of a serpent. Her eyes glittered like those of an asp, and between her half-parted lips she hissed rather than spoke to herself:

"Fif-teen hun-dred crowns! It is the price of a barony! I, who have taken life for a half-pistole!"

"You will save two lives for this," I pleaded.

But the she-devil, though sorely tempted, was faithful. What de Gomeron's power over her was I know not. I could add nothing to my offer; I had laid my all on the hazard, and it was not to be done.

“*Pouf!*” she mocked, “you do not go high enough. You do not promise the palace in the moon. But I waste my time. Is it ‘Yes,’ or ‘No,’ for the Captain?”

There was another chance, and I would risk that. I made a step nearer the opening.

“Give me something to drink, and I will answer at once.”

“Ah! ha! Monsieur requires some courage. Here is a flask of Frontignac, but it is expensive, and Monsieur, I am afraid, has left his belt outside his room. The Frontignac is five crowns.”

“You forgot my pockets,” I answered. “Here are two pistoles; hand me the wine.”

“The money first,” and she stretched out her hand.

Like a flash I closed my fingers on her wrist, and drew in her hand to the full length of the arm.

“If you scream, if you utter a sound, I will tear your arm from its socket.”

The answer was a shriek that might have been heard a half-mile away, and then a foul oath and a howl of pain. It was hardly a knightly deed, but there was too much at stake to mince matters; and on her scream I gave the prisoner arm I held a wrench strong enough to show that I could keep my word. As the shrill echoes of her cry died away, I could hear her breathing heavily on the opposite side of the door, and she struggled mutely and with surprising strength to free herself. There was no answer to her call for help. There must have been many a shriek for help that had rung through that terrible dungeon, and died away answerless but for the mocking echoes! And Babette knew this, for she ceased to utter a sound after that one long scream, and fought in silence like a she-wolf at bay. At last she leaned ex-

hausted against the door, and I felt that half my game was won. It had been an unexpected thought, and I had jumped at the opportunity Providence had thrown in my way.

"Do you hear?" I said; "open the door, or—" and I gave another half-turn to her arm.

She who could inflict such suffering on others was of those who were unable to bear the slightest pain herself. She moaned in agony and called out:

"Free me, and I promise—I promise anything."

I only laughed and repeated my order, relieving the strain on her arm, however, so that she could slip back a half-pace or so from the wicket. Then I heard the great lock open and the chain put down, and Babette's voice trembling with anger and pain.

"It is open."

The door swung outwards, so that all I had to do was to fold my prisoner's arm from the elbow along its face as I pushed it open. It kept her perfectly secure, and enabled me to take a precaution that, it turned out, was needed, for as I pushed the door I drove the death-hunter back with it, and the moment it was sufficiently open to let me pass, I sprang out and seized her left arm. Quick as I was, however, I was not quite quick enough to avoid the blow of her dagger, and received a flesh wound, which, however, was after all but slight. Then there was another struggle, and affairs were adjusted between Babette and myself without any special harm being done to her.

"Now listen to me," I said. "Whatever happens, I will kill you first if there is any treachery. Take me straight to Madame."

"She is not here," was the sullen reply.

"Then I take *you* with me to the Hôtel de Ville. Come—to your senses."

She broke into the most terrible imprecations; but time was precious, and I quenched this readily enough, and at last it was clear she was utterly cowed. Again I repeat that no harm was done, and it was only dire necessity that compelled me to use the violence I did.

"Come," and I shook her up. "Where is Madame?"

She looked from right to left with a quick, uneasy motion of her eyes.

"I do not know. She is not here."

I was compelled to believe her—or to accept her statement, which you will.

"Very well, then I waste time no longer," and suiting actions to my words, and exerting my strength to its utmost, I took her with me up the stairway, forcing her to open each of the doors that closed on it. At the last door I took the precaution of gagging Babette, and fastened her arms securely, but lightly, behind her back with her own girdle. Then holding her against the wall, I ran rapidly over the whole position. If Madame was in the house, which was uncertain, I could effect the rescue better from without than within. If, on the other hand, she was not there, I would be wasting most valuable time, and perhaps ruin all chance of saving her, by searching the rooms of the Toison d'Or, unarmed as I was. Once free, I could force de Gomeron to give up his victim. He would not, after the charges I should lay against him in an hour, dare to leave Paris, whatever else he might do. That would in itself be a confession of guilt. As for Babette, I felt it was impossible to drag her with me through the streets of Paris.

"Look here!" and I gave my prisoner a shake. "I fully believe that Madame is here, and if you wish to save yourself from the rack—it hurts more than what I have done to you—you will see that no harm comes to her. You follow?"

She was speechless, but her eyes were blazing with wrath as she made a sullen movement of her head.

"You had also better tell Monsieur de Gomeron, your master, that I refuse his terms. It will save him the trouble of knowing that I have escaped—you understand?"

This time she nodded eagerly enough.

"Now," I went on, "we will open the last door."

I took the bunch of keys, and, after a try or two, succeeded in hitting on the right one. After this I pushed Babette before me into the small flagged yard, and saw to my surprise that it was night, and that the moon was out. Then I gave the fact no further thought beyond an inward "Thank God!" for the uncertain moonlight that would cover my escape. As I pushed my captive along the shadow of the wall until we came to the entrance gate, I looked around and above me carefully, but there was nothing to indicate where Madame was. A hundred times was I tempted to turn back and risk all in searching the house for her, and it was only because I was convinced that the sole chance of saving her was to be free first myself that I did not give in to my desire. On reaching the gate I discovered that there was a wicket in it large enough to squeeze a man's body through, and that this was closed by a heavy pair of iron cross-bars, a secure enough defence from the outside. Holding Babette at arm's-length from me, I put down the bar and opened the wicket. Then, still keeping my hold on her, I freed

her hands, and, bending slightly forwards and looking her straight in the face, said:

“Remember! And adieu, Madame de—Mauginot!”

At these words, which brought back to her memory her crime on the battle-field of La Fère, she shrank back, her eyes seemed to sink into their sockets, and as I loosed my hold of her shoulder she fell in a huddled heap on the flags of the yard.

CHAPTER XVI.

A COUNCIL OF WAR.

As I slipped through the wicket I cast a hurried glance around me, and then, acting on the impulse of the moment, ran forwards along the road for about fifty paces, with Babette's dagger clenched in my hand. There I was brought to a stand by a dead wall, studded with iron spikes at the top, which rose sheer above me for fully twenty feet and barred all further progress. It was evident that the Toison d'Or stood in a blind alley, and that I had taken the wrong turning. Not even an ape could have scaled the moss-grown and slippery surface of those stones, and, leaning against a buttress in the darkest corner of the wall, I stood for a moment or so and waited, determined to sell my life as dearly as possible should I be pursued. There was no sound, however; all was still as the grave. I ran my eye down the road, but the moon was not bright enough to penetrate the shadows, and I could make out nothing except the many-storied and gabled buildings that, packed closely to each other, beetled over the passage. The hanging turrets projecting

from these houses were for all the world like gigantic wasps' nests, such as are seen clinging to the rocks of the upper Dordogne. Here and there a turret window showed a light glimmering behind it, and, had I time, I might have pictured to myself a resemblance between this "beetle-browed" passage to that of some long, narrow, and sluggish mountain tarn, guarded on each side by an impassable barrier of frowning rocks. It was, however, not a moment to let oneself be impressed by scenery, and, eyes and ears on the stretch, I peered into the indistinct light to see the slightest movement, to catch the slightest sound. But the silence remained undisturbed. It was an eyrie of night-hawks, and they were hunting now far from their nests. So I stole forth from the shadow of the buttress, and, keeping the dagger ready to strike, retraced my steps past the Toison d'Or and along the winding and crooked passage, keeping as far away from the walls as possible to avoid any sudden attack, until at last I found myself in a cross street, down which I went, taking note of such landmarks as I could to guide me back, when I should return with vengeance in my right hand. The cross street led into other winding and twisting lanes, whose squalid inhabitants were either flitting up and down, or quarrelling amongst themselves, or else sitting in a sullen silence. I guessed I had got myself into one of the very worst parts of Paris, and as I had heard that it was more than dangerous to be recognised in such places as one not belonging to the noble order of cut-purses, I did not halt to make inquiries, but pursued my way steadily along the labyrinth of streets, feeling more lost at every step I took. Once or twice I passed a street stall, and, as the flare of the torches which lit up its gruesome contents fell on me, I was looked at curiously; but so

soiled and wet was I, so torn my cloak and doublet in the struggle with de Gomeron's bravos, that at the most they took me for a night-hawk of superior feather, whose plumes had been ruffled by a meeting with the law. That I inspired this idea was evident, indeed, from the way in which one terrible-looking old man leaned forwards and, shaking his palsied finger at me, croaked out:

"Run, captain; run, Messire de Montfaucon!"

I hurried past as fast as I could, followed by the laughter of those who heard the remark, thinking to myself it was lucky it was no worse than a jibe that was flung at me.

How long I wandered in that maze of streets I cannot say, but at last I came upon an open space, and, finding it more or less empty, stopped to take my bearings. My only chance to get back to my lodging that night—and it was all-important to do so—was to strike the Seine at some point or other; but in what direction the river lay, I could not, for the life of me, tell. At last I determined to steer by the moon, and, holding her track to the south-west of me, went on, keeping as a landmark on my left the tall spire of a church whose name I then did not know. So I must have plodded on for about an hour, until at last I was sensible that the street in which I was in was wider than the others I had passed through, and, finally, I saw before me a couple of lanterns, evidently slung on a rope that stretched across a street much broader still than the one I was in. That, and the sight of the lanterns, convinced me that I had gained one of the main arteries of the city, and it was with an inward "Thank God!" that I stepped under the light and looked about me, uncertain which direction I should take, for if I kept the moon behind me, as I had done hitherto, I

should have to cross over and leave the street, and I felt sure this would be a serious error that would only lead me into further difficulties. It was as yet not more than a half-hour or so beyond compline, so the street was full. And unwilling to attract the attention of the watch, which had a habit of confining its beat to places where it was least required, I began to stroll slowly down, determined to inquire the way of the first passer-by who looked in a mood amiable enough to exchange a word with so bedraggled a wretch as I was then.

I had not long to wait, for in a short time I noticed one who was evidently a well-to-do citizen hurrying along, with a persuading staff in his right hand, and the muffled figure of a lady clinging on to his left arm. I could make out nothing of her; but the man himself was short and stout of figure, and I ran to the conclusion that he must be a cheery soul, for, as far as I could see by the light of the street lamps, he looked like one who enjoyed a good meal and a can to follow, and approaching, I addressed him—

“Pardon, monsieur, but I have lost my way.”

I had hardly spoken so much, when, loosening his arm from the lady, the little man jumped back a yard, and began flourishing his stick.

I saw that in the next moment he would shout for the watch, and stopped him with a quick—

“Monsieur, I have been attacked and robbed—there,” and I pointed in the direction whence I had come. “I have escaped but with my life, and I pray you tell me how to find my way to the Rue de Bourdonnais.” The lady, who had at first retreated with a little cry of alarm behind her companion, here stepped forward with a soft—

"Poor man! are you much hurt?"

"Not in the least, mademoiselle, thank you," and I unconsciously moved a step forward.

"Stand back!" called out the little man, dabbing his stick at me, "and say Madame, sir—the lady is my wife."

"Pardon my error, sir, but——"

The lady, however, interposed—

"Be still, Mangel. So you wish to find the Rue de Bourdonnais, sir?"

"He had better find the watch," interrupted Maître Mangel; "they have gone that way, towards the Porte St. Martin."

"This, then, is the——"

"Rue St. Martin."

"A hundred thanks, mademoiselle."

"Madame—*Madame* Mangel, monsieur."

"Pardon, I now know where I am, and have only to follow my nose to get to where I want. I thank you once more, and good night."

"Good night, monsieur," answered Madame; but Maître Mangel, who was evidently of a jealous complexion, tucked his wife under his arm and hurried her off, muttering something under his breath.

I let my eye follow them for a moment or so, and ere they had gone many paces, Madame Mangel, who appeared to be of a frolicsome spirit, turned her head and glanced over her shoulder, but was immediately pulled back with a jerk by her husband, whose hand moved in much the same manner as that of a nervous rider when clawing at the reins of a restive horse. Then I, too, turned and went down in an opposite direction along the Rue St. Martin, smiling to myself at the little scene I had witnessed, and

my spirits rising at every step I took, for I felt each moment was bringing me nearer the time when I should be able to effect Claude's freedom, and balance my account with Adam de Gomeron. At last I saw the spire of St. Jacques de la Boucherie to my right, and a few steps more brought me to the bridge of Notre Dame. The passage was, however, closed, and, turning to the west, I kept along the river face and made for the Pont du Change, hoping that this bridge would be open, else I should perforce be compelled to swim the Seine once more, as no boats were allowed to ply during the night. Here, however, I was not disappointed, and threading my way through the crowd that still lingered round the money-changers' stalls, I soon found myself in the Barillierie, and hastening past Sainte Chapelle to the Rue des Deux Mondes. I had determined in the first instance to seek out de Belin, but thought better of that as I went along the Rue St. Martin, when I considered how unlikely I was to find my friend at home, whereas, on the other hand, the notary and his wife were sure to be in their house; and it moreover struck me as being the safest plan to go straight there until I could communicate with de Belin. For if I should be suspected of making away with Madame, no one would think me fool enough to come back to my lodging, which was well known, no doubt, and where I could be trapped at once.

At last I was once again in the Rue des Deux Mondes, very footsore and weary, but kept up by the thought of what I had before me, and ready to drop dead before I should yield to fatigue. There was no one in the street, and, seizing the huge knocker, I hammered at the door in a manner loud enough to waken the dead. It had the effect of arousing one or two of the inhabitants of the

adjoining houses, who opened their windows and peered out into the night, and then shut them again hastily, for the wind blew chill across the Passeur aux Vaches. There was no answer to my knock, and then I again beat furiously at the door, with a little sinking of my heart as it came to me that perhaps some harm had befallen these good people. This time, however, I heard a noise within, and presently Pantin's voice, inquiring in angry accents who it was that disturbed the rest of honest people at so late an hour.

"Open, Pantin," I shouted; "it is I—do you not know me?"

Then I heard another voice, and a sudden joy went through me, for it was that of my trusty Jacques.

"*Grand Dieu!* It is the Chevalier! Open the door quick, man!"

It was done in a trice, and as I stepped in Pantin closed it again rapidly, whilst Jacques seized my hand in his, and then, letting it go, gambolled about like a great dog that had just found its master.

I noticed, however, at the first glance I took round, that both Pantin and Jacques were fully dressed, late as it was, and that the notary was very pale, and the hand in which he held a lantern was visibly trembling.

"Monsieur," he began, and then stopped; but I understood the question in his voice, and answered at once—

"Pantin, I have come back to free her—come back almost from the dead."

"Then, monsieur, there are those here who can help you still. I had thought you brought the worst news," and he looked at me where I stood, soiled and wet. "This way, monsieur le chevalier," he continued.

"In a moment, Pantin," cut in dame Annette's voice,

and the good woman came up to me with a flagon of warmed wine in her hand.

"Take this first, chevalier, 'tis Maître Pantin's night-cap; but I do not think he will need it this night. God be thanked you have come back safe."

I wrung her hand, and drained the wine at a draught, and then, with Pantin ahead holding his lantern aloft, we ascended the stair that led to my apartments. As we went up I asked Jacques—

"Did you manage the business?"

"Yes, monsieur, and Marie and her father are both safe at Auriac. I rode back almost without drawing rein, and reached here but this afternoon; and then, monsieur, I heard what had happened, and gave you up for lost."

At this juncture we reached the small landing near the sitting-room I had occupied, and Pantin without further ceremony flung open the door, and announced me by name. I stepped in with some surprise, the others crowding after me, and at the first glance recognised, to my astonishment, de Belin, who had half risen from his seat, his hand on his sword-hilt, as the door was flung open; and in the other figure, seated in an armchair, and staring moodily into the fire, saw Palin, who, however, made no movement beyond turning his head and looking coldly at me. Not so Belin, for he sprang forwards to meet me in his impulsive way, calling out—

"*Arnidieu!* You are back! Palin, take heart, man! He would never have come back alone."

The last words hit me like a blow, and my confusion was increased by the demeanour of Palin, who gave no sign of recognition; and there I stood in the midst of them, fumbling with the hilt of my sword, and facing the

still, motionless figure before me, the light of the candles falling on the stern, drawn features of the Huguenot.

My forehead grew hot with shame and anger, as I looked from one to another, and then, like a criminal before a judge, I faced the old man and told him exactly what had happened—all except one thing; that I kept back. At the mention of Ravailac's name, and of his identity with the Capuchin, the Vicomte de Belin swore bitterly under his moustache; and but for that exclamation my story was heard in stillness to its bitter end. For a moment one might have heard a pin fall, and then Palin said, "And you left her—there!" The dry contempt of his manner stung me; but I could say nothing, save mutter—

"I did what I could."

"The one ewe-lamb of the fold—the last and the best beloved," he said, as if speaking to himself; and then in a sudden fury he sprang to his feet. "But why do we stand prating here? There are five of us, and we know where she is—come."

But Belin put his hand on his shoulder. "Patience, Maître Palin—patience."

"I have had enough of patience and enough of trusting others," and the Huguenot shook off his hand and looked at me with a scowl. "Come, Monsieur d'Auriac; if you would make amends, lead me to this Toison d'Or and we will see what an old arm can do."

"I am ready," I answered.

But Belin again interfered.

"Messieurs, this is madness. From what I have gathered d'Auriac will prove but a blind guide back. We are not, moreover, sure that Madame is there. Sit still

here, you Palin; neither you nor d'Auriac are fit to think. Fore Gad! it was lucky I thought of this for our meeting-place to-night, Palin. Sit still and let me think."

"I can think well enough," I cut in, "and I have my plan; but I should like to ask a question or two before I speak."

"And these questions are——?"

"I presume I am suspected of this abduction?"

"And of more. *Nom de dieu!* Man! your mare was found dead, and beside her one of the Marshal's guards, run through the heart," answered de Belin.

"Then of course if I am seen I am in danger?"

"A miracle only could save you. The King is enraged beyond measure, and swears he will let the Edict go in its full force against you. The Camarguer has made a fine story of it, saying how he tried to stop the abduction, but failed in the attempt."

"In short, then, it would ruin all chances if we adopt Maître Palin's suggestion?"

"You are saving me the trouble of thinking."

"Again," I went on, "it is not certain if Madame is still at the Toison d'Or, and apart from that I doubt if I could find my way back there to-night, unless anyone could guide me," and I looked at the Pantins, who shook their heads sorrowfully.

"This settles our going out to-night," I went on; "there is but one thing to do to-morrow—to find the house. It will be easy to discover if Madame is within. After that I propose a rescue by the ordinary means of the law."

"Would it not be as simple to have recourse to Villeroi the first thing to-morrow?" asked Belin.

"Simple enough; but the law has its delays, and if once the house is raided and Madame is not there we may whistle for our prize."

"But the wheel?" put in Pantin.

"Will break Babette, who will not know. M. de Gomeron is no fool to trust her more than the length of his hand. No—I will leave nothing to chance. I propose then to seek out the house to-morrow, with Pantin's help, if he will give it."

"Most willingly," put in the notary.

"Thanks, my good friend. That we will find it I am certain, and then we can act. In the meantime I must ask you by all means in your power to get the search of the law after me delayed."

"Then M. de Villeroi must hear some certain news to-morrow," said Annette.

"There speaks a woman's wit," exclaimed Belin; "well, after all, perhaps your plan is the best."

"And in this search of to-morrow I will share," Palin suddenly exclaimed. But my heart was sore against him for what he had said.

"Pardon me, Maître Palin; this is my right—I do this alone."

"Your right," he sneered.

"Yes, Maître Palin, my right; I go to rescue my promised wife."

"And besides, Monsieur le chevalier will want no help, for I am here," Jacques must needs thrust in; "and when Monsieur is married," he blundered on, "we will rebuild Auriac, mount a brace of bombards on the keep, and erect a new gallows for ill-doers."

"Silence, sir!" I thundered, half beside myself at the idiot's folly, for I saw the gleam in the eyes of Pantin and

his wife, and despite the gravity of the occasion de Belin had hard to do to repress an open laugh.

As for Palin, he said nothing for a moment, his features twitching nervously. At last he turned to me, "It is what I have hoped and prayed for," he said, holding out his hand; "forgive me—I take back the words so hastily spoken—it is an old man who seeks your pardon."

I took his hand in all frankness, and he embraced me as a son, and then in awhile de Belin said—

"We must be up and doing early to-morrow, and d'Auriac is in need of rest. He will share my bed here to-night; and harkee, Pantin! rouse us with the dawn."

We then parted, the Pantins showing the Huguenot to his chamber, and Jacques but waiting for a moment or so to help me off with my dripping things. My valises were still lying in the room, and I was thus enabled to get the change of apparel I so much needed.

When at last we were abed I found it impossible to sleep, and Belin was at first equally wakeful. For this I was thankful, as I began to grow despondent, and felt that after all I had lost the game utterly. But the Vicomte's courage never faltered, and in spite of myself I began to be cheered by his hopefulness. He explained to me fully how it came that he was at the Rue des Deux Mondes. He wished to discuss with Palin some means for discovering me, and as the Huguenot, fearing to return to the Rue Varenne after what had happened, and yet unwilling to leave Paris, had sought Pantin's home, de Belin had determined to pass the night here to consult with him, giving out to his people that he had gone on a business to Monceaux.

"I will see Sully the first thing to-morrow," he said, as we discussed our plans, "and if I mistake not it is

more than Madame we will find at the Toison d'Or. Be of good cheer, d'Auriac, your lady will come to no harm. The Camarguer is playing too great a game to kill a goose that is likely to lay him golden eggs. I'm afraid though he has spoilt a greater game for his master."

"How do you mean?" I asked, interested in spite of myself.

"Only this, that unless you are extremely unfortunate I regard the rescue of Madame de Bidache as certain. I am as certain that this will lead to the arrest of de Gomeron and his confederates. They will taste the wheel, and that makes loose tongues, and it may lead to details concerning M. de Biron that we sadly need."

"It seems to me that the wheel is perilously near to me as well."

"There is the Edict, of course," said de Belin, "but Madame's evidence will absolve you, and we can arrange that you are not put to the question at once."

The cool way in which he said this would have moved me to furious anger against him did I not know him to be so true a friend. As it was I said sharply—

"Thank you, I will take care that the wheel does not touch me."

"Very well," he answered; "and now I shall sleep; good night."

He turned on his side and seemed to drop off at once, and as I lay through the weary hours of that night I sometimes used to turn to the still figure at my side with envy at the peace of his slumber.

CHAPTER XVII.

MAÎTRE PANTIN SELLS CABBAGES.

AT last, just as my patience was worn to its last shred, I saw the glaze in the window begin to whiten, and almost immediately after heard footsteps on the landing. This was enough for me, and, unable to be still longer, I sprang out of bed and hastened to open the door myself. It admitted Jacques, and a figure in whom I should never have recognised the notary had I not known that it could be no other than Pantin. Jacques bore a tray loaded with refreshments, and Pantin held a lantern, for it was still dark, in one hand, and something that looked like the folds of a long cloak hung in the loop of his arm. The noise of their entrance awoke de Belin. With a muttered exclamation I did not catch, he roused himself, and, the candles being lit, we proceeded to make a hasty toilet. As I drew on my boots I saw they were yet wet and muddy, and was about to rate Jacques when Pantin anticipated, "I told him to let them be so, monsieur,—you have a part to play; put this over your left eye." And with these words he handed me a huge patch. Then, in place of my own hat, I found I had to wear a frayed cap of a dark sage-green velvet, with a scarecrow-looking white feather sticking from it. Lastly, Pantin flung over my shoulders a long cloak of the same colour as the cap, and seemingly as old. It fell almost down

to my heels, and was fastened at the throat by a pair of leather straps in lieu of a clasp.

"Faith!" exclaimed the Vicomte, as he stood a little to one side and surveyed me, "if you play up to your dress you are more likely to adorn than raise the gallows Jacques spoke of."

But I cut short his gibing with an impatient command to Pantin to start. The little man, however, demurred—

"You must eat something first, monsieur—not a step will I budge till you have done that."

I forced myself to swallow a little, during which time our plans of overnight were hastily run over; Palin, who had joined us, declared he would go to the Princess Catherine, and seek her aid. We knew that was useless, but not desiring to thwart the old man let him have his will. It was decided, however, in case I had anything to communicate, that I should hasten to the Rue de Bourdonnais, and that in the meantime the Vicomte would see the Master-General at once and try what could be done. This being settled, and having ordered Jacques, who protested loudly, to stay behind, Pantin and I started off on our search for the Toison d'Or.

As he closed the entrance door behind him carefully, and Jacques turned the key, I looked up and down the Rue des Deux Mondes, but there was not a soul stirring.

"'Tis the cold hour, monsieur," said Pantin, shivering as he drew the remnant of a cloak he wore closer over his shoulders, "and we are safe from all eyes," and then I noticed for the first time that his feet were bare, and that he carried a pair of old shoes in one hand and an empty basket in the other.

"But you are not going like that, man!" I said; "you will catch a fever."

"We are going to the Faubourg St. Martin, monsieur, and there is no danger of the plague now."

Though I could not but feel more than grateful for the way in which the good fellow was labouring for me, I said nothing, but followed him as he entered the mist that rose from the river and clung heavily to its banks.

It was, as Pantin had said, the cold hour, and all Paris was asleep. Above us the sky still swarmed with stars, though a pale band of light was girdling the horizon. Here and there in the heaving mist on the river we saw the feeble glimmer of a lanthorn that had survived through the night and still served to mark the spot where a boat was moored. All around us the outlines of the city rose in a brown silhouette; but the golden cross on the spire of Nôtre Dame had already caught the dawn and blazed like a beacon against the grey of the sky overhead.

As the Pont au Change was the latest of the bridges to close, it was the earliest to open; but when we came there we had to cool our heels for half an hour or so before we could pass through; and by that time the city was already beginning to awake. I could not repress a slight shudder as we passed the dreary walls of the Chatelet, just as the guard was being changed at the gate, and thought by how lucky a chance I had escaped being a guest of M. de Breze.

Once past the Chatelet we pushed on briskly, and by the time we had reached St. Jacques we were warm enough, despite the chillness of the morning. At a stall near the church, and hard by the Pont Nôtre Dame, Pantin purchased a quantity of vegetables, bidding me to keep a little ahead of him in future and guide him in

this manner as far as I knew. Whilst he was filling his basket I turned up the Rue St. Martin, wondering what the notary's object could be in transforming himself into a street hawker. I went slowly, stopping every now and again to see if Pantin was following, and observed that he kept on the side of the road opposite to me, and ever and again kept calling out his wares in a monotonous sing-song tone. Thus far and for a space further I knew the road, and, observing that Pantin was able to keep me well in view, increased my pace until at last we came to the cross street near which I had met the jealous Mangel and his wife. Up the cross street I turned without hesitation, now almost facing the tall spire that had been my landmark, and I began to think I would be able to trace my way to the Toison d'Or without difficulty when I suddenly came to a standstill and faltered. For here there were half a dozen lanes that ran this way and that, and for the life of me I could not tell which was the one I had taken but a few hours before, so different did they look now to what they had appeared by moonlight. As I halted in a doubting manner Pantin hurried up, and, there being one or two near me, began to urge me to buy his cabbages. I made a pretence of putting him off, and then, the strangers having passed, I explained I had lost my bearings. "I see a wine shop open across the road, chevalier—go in and call for a flask and await me," he answered rapidly.

I nodded, and bidding him begone in a loud tone, swaggered across the street, and entering the den—it could be called by no other name—shouted for a litre of Beaugency, and flung myself down on a rough stool with a clatter of my sword and a great showing of the pistol butts that stuck out from my belt.

The *cabaret* had just opened, but early as I was I was not the first customer, for a man was sitting half-asleep and half-drunk on one of the foul-looking benches, and as I called for my wine, he rose up, muttering, "Beaugency! He wants Beaugency—there is none here," he went on in a maudlin manner, turning to me. "At the Toison d'Or——"

I almost started at the words; but the landlord, whose face appeared from behind a cask at my shout, and whose countenance now showed the utmost anger at his old client's speech, suddenly seized him by the neck and hustled him from the room—"The drunken knave!" he said with a great oath, "to say that I kept no Beaugency—here, captain," and he handed me a litre, with a much-stained glass, "here is Beaugency that comes from More's own cellars," and he looked knowingly at me.

Not wishing to hold converse with the fellow, I filled the glass, and then, flinging him a crown, bade him drink the rest of the bottle for good luck. The scoundrel drank it there and then, and as soon as he had done so returned to the charge.

"It is good wine—eh, captain?"

"It is," I answered drily; but he was not to be denied.

"Monsieur is out early, I see."

"Monsieur is out late, you mean," I made answer, playing my part, and longing for Pantin to return.

"Ho! ho!" he roared; "a good joke—captain, I do not know you, but tell me your name, and, curse me, if I do not drink your health in Arbois the day you ride to Montfaucon."

"You will know my name soon enough," I answered, humouring the fellow, "and I promise to send you the

Arbois the day I ride there. I may tell you that it was to the Toison d'Or I was recommended by my friends; but your Beaugency and your company are so good *compère* that I shall make this my house of call during my stay in the Faubourg St. Martin."

"Damn the Toison d'Or," he exclaimed, "and you are a good fellow. Let me warn you in turn that the Toison d'Or is no longer safe."

"What do you mean?" I asked, leaning forwards.

"For you, and for me, monsieur."

"Ah—my luck is good as your wine," and at that moment I caught sight of Pantin. "There is another crown to drink to our friendship, and mind you keep as good a flask for me against my return at noon—*au revoir!* I have a business at my lodging."

The wretch overwhelmed me with thanks and stood at the door watching me as I crossed over the street, with a warning glance to Pantin, and strolled slowly onwards. A little further on I turned to my left, keeping well in the middle of the road to avoid the filth and refuse thrown carelessly on each side, and as I turned I saw that my man had gone in. I was certain of one thing, that the Toison d'Or was not far off, and whilst I picked my way slowly along Pantin came up to me with his sing-song whine.

"Have you found it?" I asked in a low tone.

"No," he sang out.

At this moment a figure rose up from the steps of a house where I had noticed it crouching, a few feet from me, and swung forwards.

"Hola! 'Tis Monsieur le Capitaine! Has your Excellency tasted the Beaugency—the dog-poison. I tell your

Excellency there is but one house in the Faubourg where they sell it—the Toison d'Or.

“Go and drink some there, then,” and I tossed him a piece of silver.

He picked it up from the road where it had fallen like a dog snatching at a bone, and then stood surveying the coin, which he held in the open palm of his hand.

“*You* might,” he said; “they would not serve me,” and then with a drunken familiarity he came close to my elbow. “I’ll show you the Toison d’Or. It is there—the second turn to the left and then straight before you. As for me, I go back to taste Grigot’s Beaugency—his dog-poison,” he repeated with the spiteful insistence of a man in his cups.

“The fool in his folly speaketh wisdom!” Pantin muttered under his breath, and then the man, staggering from me, attempted to go back whence he had been flung, but either the morning air was too strong for him, or else he was taken with a seizure of some kind, for ere he had gone ten paces he fell forwards on his face, and lay there in the slime of the street.

At any other time I would have stopped to assist the man, but now I could only look upon his condition as a direct interposition of Providence, and I let him lay where he had fallen.

“Come, Pantin,” I cried, “we have found the spot.”

Following the directions given by our guide, we found he had not deceived us, and in a few minutes I was standing at the entrance of the blind passage, at one end of which was the Toison d’Or.

The wasps’ nest was not yet awake, but as I stood for a moment discussing with Pantin what we should do

next a couple of men well muffled in cloaks passed down the lane on the opposite side, and it was all I could do to preserve an expression of unconcern on my face, for in one of the two I recognised Lafin. He, too, stooped for a moment, as if to fasten a point that had come undone, and, whilst doing so, fixed his eyes full on me. I met his gaze as one might look at a perfect stranger, but seeing he continued it, put my hand to the hilt of my sword with a scowl. The doubt on his face cleared on the instant to a look of relief, and I saw his thin lips curve into a slight smile of contempt as he rose and walked quietly after his companion. That swaggering movement of my hand to my sword-hilt had convinced him that I was one of the swashbucklers of the Faubourg St. Martin, and as such unworthy even of the contempt of the heir of the Vidame.

"Who is it?" asked Pantin, who had been observing me closely.

"Lafin."

"Are you sure, monsieur?"

I nodded, and he went on, "Then, monsieur, if I mistake not, M. le Vicomte is right, and we hunt the boar as well as the wolf. I will give word of this at the Arsenal before three hours are over."

We then went slowly towards the Toison d'Or in the same order in which we had come up the Rue St. Martin, my heart full of strange misgivings at Lafin's presence in the street. The sun had already whitened the gables of the houses, but so narrow was the passage that it seemed as if it must always be in shadow. There were a few people stirring—one or two street urchins, who flung gibes at Pantin, but gave me a wide berth; half a dozen women, in whose faces sin and want had set their seals,

and a man or two of the worst class. Beyond the high, dead wall which closed in the passage I could now see the tops of some trees, and judged from this that we were almost upon the walls of Paris, and in this, as it turned out, I was right. At last I came opposite the Toison d'Or. The gate leading into the little court was shut, and so was every window facing the street. The sign-board was swinging sadly over the closed door, and at the first glance it looked as if the house was deserted. For a moment the thought struck me to knock boldly at the door, and when it was opened to force my way in and trust to luck for the rest, but I was cooled on the instant when I thought what failure meant. I would trust as little to chance as possible. I passed slowly on, and found that the Toison d'Or joined on to another, but much smaller, house which had its bound set to it by the wall that crossed the street. The sash of a window on the top story of this house was up, and as I came up to it the front door swung open and a man stood on the steps and looked me full in the face. As my glance passed him, I saw that the door opened into a room that was used apparently as a shop for all kinds of miscellaneous articles, and the man himself would have stood well for the picture of a thieves' fence, which, indeed, he was.

"A good morning, captain," he said. "Will you buy—or have you come to sell?" he asked, dropping his voice.

As he spoke, Pantin came up and began to importune the man from a safe distance to purchase his wares, but beyond a curse had no further attention paid to him, and with a disappointed air he went slowly back towards the Toison d'Or. It flashed upon me that something had

fallen my way. "I have come to buy *compère*," I answered, and, stepping into the shop, began to examine a few cast-off doublets, and flung them aside, demanding one on which the gold lace was good. A woman joined the man at this time, and whilst they were rummaging amongst their stores I hastily ran over in my mind the plan I had formed. If I could get a lodging here I would be in a position to watch who came and went from the house and strike my blow with deliberation and certainty. So at last when the doublet was shown to me, though the price was exorbitant I paid it without demur, and on the man asking if it should be sent to my lodging, I pretended to hesitate for a moment, and then explaining that as I had just come to Paris, and was in search of a lodging, I would take the doublet with me.

"Monsieur must have scaled the city walls last night, then?" the man said with a sly look.

"Exactly," I answered.

The woman, however, here cut in and explained that if it was a lodging I needed they could accommodate me.

"All the more if you buy as well as you do now, captain," said the man.

"I will sell you as cheap as you want besides," I answered, "but let me see the rooms."

"There is but one room, monsieur," answered the woman, "but it is large and furnished," and then she led me up the stairway. The room was certainly large beyond the ordinary, but I was disappointed beyond measure at finding that it was at the back of the house and would prevent me from watching who came in and out of the Toison d'Or. I objected to the situation, saying that I wanted a room overlooking the street.

"There is none," she answered shortly, "but if mon-

sieur desires to look on the street he may do so from the window at the end of this passage."

She pointed to a narrow passage that led from the door of the room to a small hanging turret, and from the arched windows of this I saw that I could see all I wanted without being seen myself. The woman seemed to be of the same kidney as her husband, drove a close bargain, and after much pretended haggling I closed with her terms, and arranged also for her to bring me my meals, explaining that for the next week or so I would stay indoors as my health was not good.

"I understand, monsieur," she said, showing her teeth.

"Then it is settled, and I will step down and bring up the doublet which I left in the shop." With these words I counted out the rent and the money for my board, coin by coin, into her hand, as if each piece I disgorged was my last, and then stepping down, found, as I expected, Pantin at the door.

The man was for ordering him away, but his wife insisted on making a purchase, in which I joined, and the fence going upstairs at that time, we three were left together. It was all important to get rid of the woman for a moment or so, and Pantin, seeing this, sold his whole basket load at a price so small that it raised even her astonishment.

"I have sold it for luck," he said, "but if madame wishes, I will sell her daily at the same rate."

"Could you bring me fruit at the same price?" I asked.

"Why not?" he answered.

"Then bring me some to-morrow."

"Certainly, captain. Where shall I put these, madame?"

But she bore them away herself, and this gave me the opportunity.

"Pantin," I said, "I have taken a room here—you understand?"

"And I," he answered, "have sold a cabbage to Babette. If you hear nothing more, meet me at dusk in the square behind St. Martin's."

There was no time to say more, for we heard the fence coming back. Pantin went off down the street, and I, after a word or two with the man, and an order to his wife regarding my meals, went slowly up to my room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SKYLIGHT IN THE TOISON D'OR.

ONCE back in my room, I flung off my cloak and took a survey of my new quarters. The room was long and low, and situated in the topmost story of the house. In one corner was a settle covered with a faded brocade, whilst on the other side there was a wardrobe and a few necessaries. The bed was placed at the extreme end of the room, and close to the window which overlooked the back of the house, and through which, from where I stood, the blue sky alone was visible; there was a table and a couple of chairs. Between the table and the bed intervened a clear space, about ten feet by six, covered with a coarse carpeting. If I am thus precise in my description, I would say I have done so in order to explain clearly what follows.

So far things were satisfactory enough, and beyond what I had a right to expect in such a locality. The one

drawback was that I would be compelled to use the turret at the end of the passage for my watch, and thus run the risk of being observed from the other houses. In the meantime I determined to see exactly what could be effected from the window, and pushing the table aside, so as to get a better view, looked out. I then saw that the house I was in as well as the Toison d'Or were both built against the remains of the old walls of Paris. Below me there was a sheer drop of fifty or sixty feet, right into the bed of the abandoned fosse, which was covered by a thick undergrowth and full of *débris*. A little beyond the fosse was a portion of what was known as the new wall. This was perhaps in a more ruinous condition than the fortification it was supposed to have replaced. The brushwood grew thick and high against it, and I could see the gap where a breach had been effected, probably during the last siege, when the Sixteen and Madame de Montpensier held Paris against the two kings. Beyond that stretched the open country, where, had I a mind to linger on the view, I might have made out the windings of the river, the houses of Corneuve, and the woods of Dugny and Gonesse. But it was not of these I was thinking, for in that survey I had grasped the fact that de Gomeron could not have chosen a spot better suited for his purposes than the Toison d'Or. It was a part of Paris as secure as if it had been cut off from the city and set in some unknown island, such as those who sail to the New World describe. I thought at first of stopping any further concern with the window, but as I was turning away I looked rather particularly at the wall below me, and saw that a ledge ran along it about three feet below the window. Following its track with my eyes, I observed that it was carried along the face of the Toison d'Or,

and in doing this I became aware that there was a window open at the back of Babette's house, and that this was situated on the same level as my room, but just about the middle instead of the extreme end, as mine was. When I considered the position of this window, and that its look-out was on a place where never a soul seemed to come, I could not but think that if Madame were in the Toison d'Or, that in all probability her room was there, and I swore bitterly to myself at the thought of how impossible it would be to reach her. I then craned out and looked upwards, and saw that my house was a half-story lower than the Toison d'Or, and that, whilst the latter had a high sloping roof, the portion of the building in which I was appeared to be a long and narrow terrace with a low machicolated parapet running along the edge. Thus if there were a door or window in the Toison d'Or that opened on to my roof, it would be possible to step out thereon; and then I drew back, my blood burning. If it was possible to step out from the Toison d'Or on to the roof of the house I occupied, it might be equally easy to get thence into the Toison d'Or. Taking my sword, I measured the distance of the ledge from the window-sill, and then, holding on to the mullions by one hand, stretched out as far as I could, and found I could just touch the top of the parapet with the point of my blade. In short, the position was this: that so hard and smooth was the outside of the wall, it was impossible for anything save a lizard to get along it to the window behind which I supposed Madame was prisoned; yet it was feasible, with the aid of a rope thrown over the grinning head of the gargoyle a little above me, or else over the low battlement of the parapet, to reach the roof, and the odds were in favour of there

being some sort of a door or window that would give ingress thence into the Toison d'Or. I began after this to be a little more satisfied with my quarters, and determined to set about my explorations about the dinner hour, when most people would be within, and the chance of discovery reduced to a minimum. I did not feel justified in putting the matter off until nightfall, as I have often observed that there was no time so good as the one I had chosen for affairs which depended much for their results upon a surprise. I now stepped out of my room, and, walking along the passage, looked out from the little turret along the face of the street. It was more alive than I had ever seen it before, but the occupants were principally women and children, with a man or so here and there. I saw that whilst the sunlight fell in patchwork and long narrow stretches on the street, it was bright enough where I was, and I perceived I had a good excuse for spending such time as I intended to behind the embrasures of the turret. And this excuse I had to bring into play at once, for as I stood there I heard a footstep on the passage, and, turning, observed the woman of the house.

"I see," she began, "you are already in your turret."

"I like the sun, my good woman, and have had a long journey."

Something in my tone made her look at me oddly, and I began to wish I were well away from the keen scrutiny of her eyes. She dropped the *tutoyer* and asked:

"If monsieur is tired he would probaby like his dinner earlier."

"*Morbleu!* The very thing, madame, and as long a bottle of Beaugency as you can get with it."

"It shall be done, monsieur," and she turned to go.

It struck me as a little odd that she should have come up in this aimless manner; but reflecting that perhaps, after all, it was due to nothing more than a desire to gratify feminine curiosity by spying what I was about, I dismissed the matter.

After allowing a little time to elapse I descended to the shop and began carelessly running my eyes over the miscellaneous collection of articles therein. The fence followed me about, now recommending this thing and now that. At last I saw what looked to be a ball of rope lying in a corner and covered with dust.

"What is that?" I inquired, touching it with the point of my sword.

The man stooped without a word and, picking it up, dusted it carefully, then he unrolled a ladder of silken cord, about twelve or fifteen feet in length.

"This, captain," he said, swinging it backwards and forwards, "belonged, not so long ago, to M. de Bellièvre, though you may not believe me."

"I have no doubt you are speaking the truth, but it seems rather weak."

"On the contrary, monsieur, will you test it and see?"

We managed to do this, by means of two hooks that were slung from a beam above us, in a manner to satisfy me that the ladder was sufficient to bear double my weight, and then, as if content with this, I flung it aside.

"Will not monsieur take it?" asked the man; "it is cheap."

"It is good enough," I answered, "if I had a business on hand, but at present I am waiting."

"If monsieur has leisure I might be able to give him a hint that would be worth something in crowns."

"I am lazy when in luck, *compère*. No, I will not take the ladder."

"It may come in useful, though, and will occupy but a small space in monsieur's room"—and seeing that I appeared to waver—"shall I take it up, I will let it go for ten crowns?"

"Five crowns or nothing," I said firmly.

"But it is of the finest silk!"

"I do not want to buy—you can take my price or leave it."

"Very well then, monsieur, thanks, and I will take it up myself."

"You need not trouble, I am going up and will take it with me."

With these words I took the ladder, folded in long loops, in my hand and went back to the turret. There I spent a good hour or so in re-examining it, and splicing one or two parts that seemed a trifle weak, at the same time keeping a wary eye on who passed and repassed the street, without, however, discovering anything to attract attention. Finally, the woman brought up my dinner, and I managed to eat, after a fashion, but made more play with the Beaugency, which was mild and of a good vintage. When the table was cleared, I sat still for about half an hour or so, playing with my glass, and then rising, saw that my door was securely fastened in such a manner that no one could effect an entrance, except by bursting the lock. This being done I removed my boots and unslung my sword, keeping my pistols, however, in my belt, and after a good look round, to see that no one was observing me, managed to loop the ladder round the gargoyle, and then tested it once more with a long pull. The silk held well enough, but the stonework of the gargoyle gave and

fell with a heavy crash into the fosse below. It was a narrow business, and it was well I had tried the strength of the cord again. I looked out from the window cautiously to see if the noise had attracted any attention, and found to my satisfaction that it had not. After allowing a little time to elapse, so as to be on the safe side, I attempted to throw the looped end I had made to the ladder so that it might fall over the parapet, between two embrasures, but discovered, after half a dozen casts, that this was not feasible from where I stood. Then I bethought me of my boyhood's training amongst the cliffs that overhung the bay of Auriac, and, stepping out on to the ledge of the window, managed with an effort to hold on to the stump of the gargoyle with one hand, and, balancing myself carefully, for a slip meant instant death, flung the loop once more, and had the satisfaction of seeing it fall as I desired. Without any further hesitation I put my foot on the rungs, and in a minute more was lying on my face behind the parapet, and thanking God I had made the effort, for before me was a large skylight, half open, from which I could command a view of the interior of one room at least of the Toison d'Or, and by which it might be possible to effect an easy entrance. Before going any further, however, I glanced round me to see how the land lay, and was delighted to find that I could not be observed from the opposite side of the street, as the portion of the house I was on was concealed from view by the gabled roof that rose about ten feet from me, leaving me in a sort of long balcony. Now that I think of it, this roof must have been an afterthought on the part of the builders; then I was but too thankful to find it existed, and had no time for reflections. By turning my head I could see, too, that the high wall that shut

in the mouth of the passage was evidently raised as a barrier between the street and the fosse, which took a bend and ran immediately below the wall. After lying perfectly still for a little, I slowly pushed myself forwards until at last I was beneath the skylight, and then, raising myself cautiously, peeped in. I saw a room of moderate size, and well but plainly furnished. In the centre was an oblong table covered with a dark cloth, and round about it were set a number of chairs. The skylight alone admitted light, and from this to the floor of the room was a matter of twelve feet or so. The chamber was empty, and I had more than half a mind to risk the descent, when the door was opened and Babette stepped in. I shrank back as low as possible, and observed that she was making arrangements for someone, for she placed a couple of decanters with glasses on the table, arranged the chairs, and then, after taking a look round, went out once more. I made up my mind to wait, and, settling myself under the skylight, began to exercise my patience. After an hour or so had passed I heard the door opened again, and then the sound of voices. Presently someone called out, "We had better shut the skylight," and then another voice, this time Lafin's, said, "No, it is no use, and we shall want light to see."

Once more I raised myself and leaned against the edge of the opening, eyes and ears intent. There were three men in the room—Lafin, de Gomeron, and another whom I did not know, but whom I judged to be an Italian from his manner of pronouncing our language. They were all three seated round the table, poring over a number of documents and conversing in low tones. After a time it appeared to me that Lafin was urging something on de Gomeron, and the free-lance, who was short of temper,

brought his clenched hand on the table in a manner to make the glasses ring, whilst he said with an oath—

“I will not—I have risked too much. I have told you before that I did not come into this for the good of my health. My prize is my own. It has nothing to do with your affair, of which I am sick.”

The other man then cut in—

“I do not see, M. de Lafin, why we should drag this matter into our discussion. If M. de Gomeron wants a wife, well—many a fair dame has had a rougher wooing than the lady you speak of. But I—I have cause for complaint. I come here expecting to meet the Marshal—and I meet you and monsieur here. I mean no offence, but I must tell you plainly my master’s instructions are that I should hear M. de Biron’s promises and take his demands from his own lips.

“And what about Epernon, Bouillon, and Tremouille, count?” asked de Gomeron.

The dark eyes of the stranger flashed on him for a moment.

“My master, the Duke of Savoy, knows their views.”

“Personally?”

The Italian waved his hand with a laugh. “Gentlemen, I have given you my terms—it is for you to choose. As for my part, I would that my master dropped this business and trusted the day to his sword.”

“That is not wont to be M. de Savoye’s way,” sneered Lafin, and the Italian rose.

“Very well, messieurs. I will then consider the issue is closed.”

“It matters not a rush to me,” exclaimed de Gomeron; but Lafin, who was moodily plucking at his moustache, spoke again, and the tones of his voice were full of chagrin.

"As you wish—I undertake that the Marshal sees you."

"Where and when? My time is precious."

"Here, at ten o'clock to-night."

"*Maledetto!* This is not a place to come to at that hour."

"It is safe—and it would be safer still if you stayed here till then. The spies of the Master-General—curse him—are everywhere, and M. de Gomeron will guarantee your protection here."

"I am deeply grateful," the count bowed slightly, a faint tone of irony in his voice. "Then you agree?"

"Yes."

"This being so, perhaps you had better go over these notes that you may be in a position to exactly understand what we can do. Our terms of course are as before, but we shall require money, and that at once."

"But large advances have already been made," objected the Italian.

"They are gone," said Lafin.

"How? Nothing has been done; and both Velasco and Savoy are unwilling to throw more money into the business unless some action is taken. How has the money gone?"

"It is gone, and there is an end of it," exclaimed Lafin sullenly. "As for the action you wish taken—you have asked to see the Marshal, and he will inform you."

"Very well! Until then, monsieur, we will not discuss this point further."

The voices dropped again after this, and they began to pore over the papers and a map that the free-lance had spread before him, making an occasional remark which I did not follow. But I had heard enough to be convinced that the plot of Anet was still in full life. It

was all important for me now to communicate what I knew at once to the Master-General. With a little ordinary care the conspirators could be trapped to a man, and if by one stroke I could effect this, as well as free Madame, anything was possible. Without further hesitation I therefore crept slowly back, and descended to my chamber as softly as a cat. Leaving the ladder swinging where it was—for I could not undo the knot—I drew on my boots, and went to the turret to reconnoitre before venturing out into the street. Imagine my chagrin and disappointment to see that three men were at the gate of the Toison d'Or, evidently on the watch, and in one of them I made out Ravailac. I might have passed the others without discovery, but it would be impossible to escape the lynx eyes of this villain, who, though young in years, had all the craft of age, and who later on was to raise himself to an eminence so bad that I know not whom to place beside him, except perhaps those who were his aiders and abettors. I did not fear to run the gauntlet—that was an easy matter; but merely doing so would make my birds take to wing, and I found myself compelled once more to hold patience by the tail until the coast was clear.

CHAPTER XIX.

"PLAIN HENRI DE BOURBON."

IMAGINE what it was to me, to whom every moment was worth its weight in gold, to see the group, and, above all, Ravailac, standing at the door of the Toison d'Or. Was there ever such cross-grained luck? If I could but pass down that narrow street without the hawk's eye of the Flagellant falling on me I might in an hour do all and more than I had ever hoped for. I could—— But *tonne dieu!* What was the use of prating about what might be. Through the embrasure of the turret I covered Ravailac with my pistol, and twice half pressed the trigger and twice restrained myself. Even if he fell the shot would ruin all. It could not be risked, and I thrust the long, black barrel back into my belt with a curse, and began to walk restlessly to and fro in the passage. It was impossible for me to keep still, my nerves were so strung. In a little I began to cool and sought my room, determined to occasionally take a turn to the turret and see if the guard was gone, but not to harass myself by watching them continually. In about an hour or so I wearied of sitting and looked out of my window again in the direction of Madame's room, as I called it to myself. At the moment of my doing so the shutter that was open towards my side suddenly closed. I could just make out a flash of white fingers on the dark woodwork, and then the face I longed to see looked out from the half of the

window still open and drew back again almost on the instant. Feeling sure that she would look out once more, I leaned forwards. Madame did as I expected, and I could see the astonishment on her face and hear her cry of joy. She tried to converse with me by signals on her fingers, and for the first time I had occasion to bless what I had up to now considered a foolish accomplishment that I picked up as a boy when I was with Monseigneur de Joyeuse. Enough that Madame made me understand that she was well treated, and I let my dear know that there were those at work who would soon free her, and perhaps there was a word or so besides on a subject which concerned us two alone. It was in the midst of this part of our converse that she drew back all at once with a warning finger on her lips, and though I waited again for a full hour, forgetting the watchers below in the fresh fears that began to assail me, I did not see her again. At the end of that time, however, a white kerchief waved twice from the window and was then withdrawn. I turned back into my room, and now that I was certain she was there my impatience at being penned up as I was became almost insupportable, and heaven alone knows how I held myself in from making a dash for it and risking all on the venture. To cut the matter short, it wanted but a few minutes to sundown when, to my relief, I saw a cloaked figure I could not recognise step out of the Toison d'Or, and, after giving a few orders to the guards, pass briskly down the street. They in their turn went into the house, and at last the road was clear. I hesitated no further and hurried down the stairs. At the door I was stopped by my host, who inquired whither I was hastening.

"I have just seen a friend," I answered, and the next moment was in the street. As I pressed forwards I had

two minds about keeping my appointment with Pantin in the square behind St. Martin's, but as I went on I reflected that I had to pass that way, and as I might need the notary's aid I would wait there a few minutes, and if he did not come, go straight to de Belin with my news.

Although I was not in a frame of mind to observe what was going on around me, I soon became conscious that one of those sudden fogs which extend over the city at this period of the year had arisen, as it were, out of nothing, and in the course of a few minutes I was compelled to slacken pace and pick my way slowly, and with the greatest caution in regard to landmarks, for I could not risk losing my way again. The fog was not a thick one, but it was sufficient, united with the coming evening, to almost blur out the streets and houses and make the figures of passers-by loom out like large and indistinct shadows. Carefully as I had tried to impress the way on my memory, I hesitated more than once as to the route I should take, and it was with something that was like a sigh of relief that I found myself at last behind St. Martin's, whose spire towered above me, a tall, grey phantom. Here I halted for a moment to see if one of the few shadows that flickered now and then through the haze might give some signal by which I might recognise Pantin. It was in vain, and, determining to wait no longer, I set off at a round pace, when I was suddenly arrested by hearing the rich tones of a voice singing:

Frère Jacques, dormez-vous?
Dormez-vous, dormez-vous?

The clear notes rang out through the fog, bringing with them a hundred recollections of the time when I had last heard the chorus. And the voice? That was not to be mistaken. It was de Belin, or else his ghost. With-

out a moment's hesitation I sang back the lines, advancing at the same time in the direction in which I had heard the voice. I had not gone fifty paces when I saw two tall shadows approaching me, and at the same time heard the verse again.

"Lisois!" I called out.

"It is he," I heard de Belin say.

Then the shadows stopped for a moment, and another and slighter figure joined them. Finally, one came forwards, and, when within a yard or so of me, spoke:

"D'Auriac, is it you?"

"Yes. I was hastening to you. Man, I have discovered all!"

"*Morbleu!*" exclaimed the Comte; "the *chanson* was a happy thought, else we had missed you in this fog."

"Is Pantin here? We have not a moment to lose."

"He is. It was he who guided us here. I have brought a friend with me. Do not ask his name; but speak freely before him, and tell us exactly what you have discovered."

With these words he took me by the arm and led me up to the two. In the shorter there was no difficulty in recognising Pantin. What with the mist, the mask on his face, and the roquelaure that enveloped him to the ears, I could make out nothing of the stranger, who did not even answer my salutation except by a slight inclination of his head. I need not say I wasted no time, but laid the matter before them, and wound up with:

"And now, gentlemen, we are three swords; let Pantin hasten and bring half a dozen of the Comte's people, and I guarantee that we not only free Madame, but take the whole brood of vipers."

"These cards won't win," said de Belin. "We must have more witnesses than ourselves, who are known to be enemies of the Marshal. The King plays at More's this evening. He is like to be there now, or else very soon, for he is bound on a frolic to-night. We will go straight there. Villeroi and Sully are both to be in attendance, and also the Marshal."

"The Marshal will not be there," I interrupted.

"If so I wager the King asks for him, and I will take it on my head to explain. In half an hour we could be back with Sully and Villeroi, and then the game is ours. Do you not agree, monseigneur?" and he turned to the stranger. All the answer was another grave inclination of the head.

"Come," went on de Belin, slipping his arm into mine. "Put yourself in my hands, d'Auriac, and I pledge you success. My God!" he broke off suddenly, "to think we should win so completely."

There was so much in what he said that I agreed without demur, and Belin hurried me onwards, the stranger and Pantin following a few steps behind. As we went on Belin whispered:

"Ask no questions, d'Auriac; say nothing until you see Sully, and ten minutes after I promise you twenty swords."

"If I do not get them in an hour," I said grimly, "I will go back myself and try what my own sword can do."

"And I will go back with you, too—there, is that not enough? Come, man!" and we hurried along through the mist as fast as we could walk, keeping on the left side of the road.

As we came up to St. Merri, de Belin stopped and blew sharply on a whistle. There was an answering call,

and from under the Flamboyant portico of the church the figure of a man, with a led horse, slipped out into the fog, now yellow with the light of the street lamps. Without a word the stranger mounted, and the two passed us at a trot.

"What the devil does that mean!" I exclaimed. "Your Monseigneur has left us!"

"To return again," answered the Comte drily. And then added, "It will be a gay party at More's to-night, and it is time we were there."

I made no answer, but, as we went on, could not help feeling uneasy in my mind at the thought of being recognised at More's; for after what de Belin had said of the King's temper towards me, I made sure that I would have scant mercy were I once arrested. And again, I would say that it was not for myself I was in dread, but for the probable consequence to Madame did any harm happen to me at this juncture.

But I had put my foot in the stirrup, and was bound to ride now; and then there was de Belin's word. At last we reached More's, and as we entered the hall I could not help wondering if the good Parisians knew that their King was playing at primero in an ordinary of the city, and would be later on, perhaps, pursued by the watch. More, whom I had not seen since my affair with d'Ayen, was in the hall, and at a word from de Belin conducted us himself up the stairway, though looking askance at me. We at length gained a long corridor, at the beginning of which Pantin was left. We stopped before the closed doors of a private dining-room from within which we could hear shouts of laughter.

"His Majesty and M. de Vitry arrived scarce a half-hour ago," whispered More as we approached the door.

"We will not trouble you further," replied the Comte; "it is the rule at these little parties to enter unannounced."

With these words he put his hand to the door and went in, I following at his heels. There were at least ten or a dozen men in the room standing round a table, at which sat the King engaged at play with M. de Bassompierre. Neither the King nor Bassompierre, who seemed absorbed in the game, took the least notice of our entrance, nor did they seem in the least disturbed by the constant laughter and converse that went on. The others, however, stopped, and then burst out in joyous greetings of de Belin and very haughty glances at me. M. le Grand, indeed, bent forward from his great height, and whispered audibly to the Comte:

"What scarecrow have you brought here, de Belin!"

"Our captain for to-night, duc—see, there is the Grand-Master looking as if each crown the King loses was the last drop of blood in the veins of Béthune." And as he said this, Sully and he glanced at each other, and a light, like that in an opal, flamed in the great minister's eyes.

M. le Grand, however, seemed to be inclined for converse with me, and, stepping up, asked, "And where do you lead us to-night, monsieur?"

I was about to make some answer when de Vitry interposed, "My dear duc, there is plenty of time to ask that. I wager you fifty pistoles that d'Ayen there throws higher than you five times out of six."

"Done," replied Bellegarde—and then those who were not round the King and Bassompierre, gathered to watch Bellegarde and d'Ayen, whose cheeks were flushed with excitement as he threw with his left hand, the right being still in a sling.

In the meantime the King played on, taking no notice of anyone, his beaked nose dropping lower towards his chin as he lost one rouleau after another to Bassompierre.

"*Ventre St. Gris!*" he exclaimed at last, "was ever such luck; at this rate I shall not have a shirt to my back in half an hour."

"If the Marshal were only here," said Sully, "we could start off at once, Sire, instead of risking any more. I see de Belin has brought our guide."

"Yes; where is Biron? I am sick of this;" and the King, who was a bad loser, rose from his seat impatiently, at the same time forgetting to hand over the last rouleau of pistoles he had lost to Bassompierre, and thrusting them back into his pocket with an absent gesture.

As if in answer to his question the door opened, admitting the slight figure and handsome face of de Gie.

"Where is the Marshal? Where is Biron?" asked ten voices in a breath.

"Yes, M. de Gie," put in the King; "where is Biron?"

"Sire, the Marshal is indisposed. He has begged me to present his excuses and to say he is too ill to come to-night;" and as he spoke I saw de Gie's jewelled fingers trembling, and his cheek had lost all colour.

"This is sorry news to spoil a gay evening," said the King; and the Master-General, pulling a comfit box from his vest pocket, toyed with it in his hand as he followed, "Biron must be ill, indeed, to stay away, Sire. What does your Majesty think? Shall we begin our rambles by calling on Monseigneur?"

"The very thing, Grand-Master, we will start at once."

"But, Sire, the Marshal is too ill to see anyone—even

your Majesty," said de Gie desperately, and with whitening lips.

I thought I heard de Vitry mutter "Traitor" under his thick moustache, but the Guardsman parried my glance with an unconcerned look. There was a silence of a half-minute at de Gie's speech, and the King reddened to the forehead.

"If it is as you say, M. le Vicomte, I know the Marshal too well not to feel sure that there are two persons whom he would see were he dying—which God forbid—and one of these two is his King. Grand-Master, we will go, but"—and his voice took a tone of sharp command, and his eyes rested first on de Gie, and then on the figure of a tall cavalier, at whose throat flashed the jewel of the St. Esprit—"but I must first ask M. de Vitry to do his duty."

As for me I was dumb with astonishment, and half the faces around me were filled with amaze. Then de Vitry's voice broke the stillness:

"My lord of Epernon, your sword—and you too, M. le Vicomte."

The duke slipped off his rapier with a sarcastic smile and handed the weapon to the Captain of the Guard; but we could hear the clicking of the buckles as de Gie's trembling fingers tried in vain to unclasp his belt. So agitated was he that de Vitry had to assist him in his task before it was accomplished.

The King spoke again in the same grating tones:

"M. de Bassompierre and you, de Luynes, I leave the prisoners in your charge. In the meantime, messieurs, we will slightly change our plans. I shall not go myself to the Marshal's house; but I depute you, Grand-

Master, and these gentlemen here, all except de Vitry, who comes with me, to repair there in my name. Should M. de Biron not be able to see you, you will come to me—the Grand-Master knows where."

"You will be careful, Sire," said Sully.

"*Mordieu!* Yes—go, gentlemen."

I was about to follow the others, but de Belin caught me by the arm as he passed out. "Stay where you are," he whispered, and then we waited until the footsteps died away along the corridor, the King standing with his brows bent and muttering to himself:

"If it were not true—if it were not true."

Suddenly he roused himself. "Come, de Vitry—my mask and cloak; and you, too, sir," he said, turning on me with a harsh glance. He put on his mask, drew the collar of his roquelaure up to his ears, and in a moment I recognised the silent stranger who had ridden off so abruptly from under the portico of St. Merri. I could not repress my start of surprise, and I thought I caught a strange glance in de Vitry's eyes; but the King's face was impassive as stone.

"We go out by the private stair, Sire; d'Aubusson is there with the horses." With these words he lifted the tapestry of the wall and touched a door. It swung back of its own accord, and the King stepped forward, the Captain of the Guard and myself on his heels. When we gained the little street at the back of More's, we saw there three mounted men with three led horses.

De Vitry adjusted the King's stirrup, who sprang into the saddle in silence, and then, motioning me to do likewise, mounted himself.

"Monsieur," said the King to me, reining in his restive

horse, "you will lead us straight to your lodging, next to the Toison d'Or."

"Sire," I made answer, "but it will be necessary to leave the horses by St. Martin's, as their presence near the Toison d'Or might arouse curiosity and suspicion."

"I understand, monsieur; have the goodness to lead on."

I rode at the head of the small troop, nosing my way through the fog with my mind full of feelings it was impossible to describe, but with my heart beating with joy. Neither d'Aubusson nor de Vitry gave a sign that they knew me, and, but for an occasional direction that I gave to turn to the right or left, we rode in silence through the mist, now beginning to clear, and through which the moon shone with the light of a faint night-lamp behind lace curtains. At St. Martin's we dismounted. There was a whispered word between the lieutenant and de Vitry, and then the King, de Vitry, and myself pressed forward on foot, leaving d'Aubusson and the troopers with the horses. It would take too long, if indeed I have the power, to describe the tumult in my mind as we wound in and out of the cross streets and by-lanes towards the Toison d'Or. At last we came to the jaws of the blind passage, and I whispered to de Vitry that we were there. Henry turned to de Vitry and asked:

"Are you sure the signals are understood, de Vitry?"

"Yes, Sire."

There was no other word spoken, and keeping on the off-side of the road, to avoid passing immediately before the door of the Toison d'Or, where it was possible a guard might be set, we went onward towards my lodging.

Favoured by the mist, which still hung over the passage, we got through without accident; but I perceived that not a light glimmered from the face of Babette's house, though I could hear the bolts of the entrance-door being drawn, as if someone had entered a moment or so before we came up. My own lodging was, however, different, and through the glaze of the window we could see the sickly glare of the light in the shop, where Monsieur and Madame were no doubt discussing the business of the day.

"We must quiet my landlord and his wife," I whispered to Vitry as we came up to the door.

"Very well," he said, and then I knocked.

The fence, who was alone, himself opened the door. "Ah, captain," he exclaimed, "we thought you were lost; but I see you have friends." He said no more, for I seized his throat with a grip of iron, whilst de Vitry laced him up with his own belt. An improvised gag put a stop to all outcry, and in a trice he was lying like a log amongst his own stolen wares.

"Madame is doubtless in bed," I said to him, and a sharp scream interrupted my words, for the woman, doubtless hearing the scuffle, had rushed into the room. M. de Vitry was, however, equal to the occasion, and she, too, was deposited beside her husband.

The King, who had taken no part in these proceedings, now said:

"I trust that woman's cry will not raise an alarm—*Ventre St. Gris* if it does!"

"Have no fear, Sire," I said in a low tone; "the cries of women in this part of your capital are too frequent to attract the least notice. They will but think that there has been a little conjugal difference."

"So far, so good. De Vitry, you will stay here. At the first sound of the Grand-Master's whistle you will answer it, and they will know what to do. I have something to say to M. d'Auriac. Take me to your room, sir."

I bowed, and, lighting a taper that stood in a holder of moulded brass—a prize that had doubtless come to my landlord through one of his clients—led the way up the rickety stairs, and stopping at the door of my chamber, opened it to let the King pass. For an instant he hesitated, fixing his keen and searching eyes on me—eyes that flashed and sparkled beneath the mask that covered half his features, and then spoke:

"M. d'Auriac, are you still an enemy of your King?"

I could make no answer; I did not know what to say, and stood, candle in hand, in silence. Then Henry laughed shortly and stepped into the room. I shut the door as I followed, and turned up the lamp on my table. Then, facing the King, I said, "Sire, I await your orders."

He had flung off his cloak and mask, and was leaning against the wardrobe, one hand on the hilt of his sword, and at my words he spoke slowly: "I desire to see this room in the Toison d'Or, and to look upon the assembly that has met there with my own eyes."

"Now, Sire?"

"Yes, now."

"Your Majesty, it is not now possible!"

"*Ventre St. Gris!*—not possible!"

"Permit me, Sire—the only way is by this window. If your Majesty will step here, you will see the risk of it. I will go and see if they have met; but I conjure you not to make the attempt. The slightest accident would be fatal."

"Do you think I have never scaled a rock before?" he said, craning out of the window. "Am I a child, M. d'Auriac, or *mille tonnerres*? Because my beard is grey, am I in my dotage? I will go, sir, and thank God that for this moment I can drop the King and be a simple knight. You can stay behind, monsieur, if you like. I go to test the truth of your words."

"Your Majesty might save yourself the trouble. I again entreat you; your life belongs to France."

"I know that," he interrupted haughtily. "No more prating, please. Will you go first, or shall I?"

There was no answer to this. It flashed on me to call to de Vitry for aid to stop the King, but one look at those resolute features before me convinced me that such a course would be useless. I lowered the light, and then testing the ends of the ladder again and again, made the ascent as before. Leaning through the embrasure, I saw the dark figure of the King already holding on to the ladder, and he followed me, as agile as a cat. Making a long arm, I seized him by the shoulder, and with this assistance he clambered noiselessly over the parapet and lay beside me."

"Cahors over again," he whispered; "and that is the skylight. They burn bright lamps."

"The easier for us to see, Sire. Creep forward softly and look."

One by one we stole up to the skylight, and the King, raising himself, glanced in, my eyes following over his shoulders. For full five minutes we were there, hearing every word, seeing every soul, and then the King bent down softly, and, laying a hand on my shoulder, motioned me back. It was not until we reached the parapet that

he said anything, and it was as if he were muttering a prayer to himself.

When we got back I helped him to dress. He did not, however, resume his roquelaure or hat, but stood playing with the hilt of his sword, letting his eye run backward and forward over the vacant space in my room. At last he turned to me:

"Monsieur, you have not answered the question I put you a moment before."

"Sire," I answered boldly, "is it my fault?"

He began to pull at his moustache, keeping his eyes to the ground and saying to himself, "Sully will not be here for a little; there is time." As for me, I took my courage in both hands and waited. So a half-minute must have passed before he spoke again.

"Monsieur, if a gentleman has wronged another, there is only one course open. There is room enough here—take your sword and your place."

"I—I——," I stammered. "Your Majesty, I do not understand."

"I never heard that monsieur le chevalier was dense in these matters. Come, sir, time presses—your place."

"May my hand wither if I do," I burst out. "I will never stand so before the King."

"Not before the King, monsieur, but before a man who considers himself a little wronged, too. What! is d'Auriac so high that he cannot stoop to cross a blade with plain Henri de Bourbon?"

And then it was as if God Himself took the scales from my eyes, and I fell on my knees before my King.

He raised me gently. "Monsieur, I thank you. Had I for one moment led a soul to suspect that I believed in you from the first, this nest of traitors had never been

found. St. Gris—even Sully was blinded. So far so good. It is much for a King to have gained a friend, and hark! if I am not mistaken, here is de Vitry."

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE SIGN OF "THE TOISON D'OR."

TURNING, we beheld de Vitry at the open door, the small and narrow figure of Pantin at his elbow, and, close behind, the stern features of the Grand-Master, the anxiety on whose face cleared as he saw the King before him. He was about to speak, but Henry burst in rapidly:

"I know all, my lord. It is time to act, not talk. *Arnidieu!* But I shall long remember this frolic!"

"It would seem that God has given us a great deliverance, Sire. All is ready. I came but to see that your Majesty was safe and unharmed, and to leave Du Praslin with a sufficient guard for your person whilst we took our prisoners."

As Sully spoke the King threw his roquelaure over his arm and answered coldly, "Monsieur, you are very good. When I want a guard I shall ask for one. I have yet to learn that Henri de Bourbon is to lurk in a corner whilst blows are going, and I shall lead the assault myself!"

"And the first shot from a window, fired by some *croquemort*, might leave France at the feet of Spain, I cut in bluntly, whilst de Vitry stamped his foot with vexation, and the forehead of the Grand-Master wrinkled and furrowed, though he gave me an approving look from under his shaggy brows.

For a moment it was as if my words would have stayed the King. He looked at me fixedly and stabbed at the carpet with the point of his blade, repeating to himself, "At the feet of Spain—Spain! Never!" he added, recovering himself and looking highly around. "Never! Messieurs, we shall all yet see the lilies flaunting over the Escorial."

"Amen!" exclaimed a voice from the darkness of the stairway, and I heard the grinding of a spurred heel on the woodwork of the floor.

"Come," said the King, "we have no time to lose, and if we delay longer that hot-head de Belin will strike the first blow."

"With your Majesty's permission, I will make an assault on the rear," I said.

"On the rear!" exclaimed de Vitry, whilst the Grand-Master said, "It is impossible!"

But I only pointed to the window, and Henry laughed.

"*Ventrebleu!* I understand—a great idea! But, monsieur, take care how you give away a secret. I shall have no peace if Monseigneur the Grand-Master hears what has happened."

I was young enough still to feel my face grow hot at the approval in the King's voice, and then, without another word, they passed out, *tramp, tramp*, down the stairs, all except Sully, who stayed behind for a moment.

"Monsieur," he asked, "what has happened between you and the King?"

"His Majesty has pardoned me."

"A child might see that. What else? Be quick!"

"And has given me orders to meet you as you enter the Toison d'Or."

The frown on his face cleared. "Well answered,

chevalier. The King, I see, has won a faithful and discreet friend. Make your attack when you hear the petard." Then he, too, turned his broad shoulders on me and followed the rest.

As the sound of the heavy footfalls ceased I gave a last look at my pistols, drew in my sword-belt by a hole, and, all booted as I was, essayed the ladder again. The practice I had with it made the ascent easy now, and perhaps it was this that rendered me careless, for, as I was climbing, my foot slipped with a grating noise, and as I stopped for a moment, with one leg over the parapet and the other trailing over the drop behind, I heard a quick "What is that?" through the open skylight. The voice was the Marshal's, and I almost felt that I could see his nervous start and rapid upward glance as the scrabbling noise reached his ears. Then came Lafin's answer, in those cool tones that can penetrate so far:

"A cat—only a cat, monseigneur!"

All was still again, and I crept softly to the opening. I did not dare look in, but crouched beneath the skylight, waiting for the signal. I had already observed that the skylight was but a light, wooden framework, with a glazing between, and would need no great effort to break down—one strong push and the way was clear before me. So I stayed for a minute of breathless silence, then from far below came a sharp, shrill whistle, hurried exclamations from the plotters, and now the explosion of the petard, that made the house rock to and fro like a tree in the wind.

I had no need to force open the skylight. The effect of the explosion did that most effectually for me and blew out the lamps in the room below as well, reducing it on a sudden to absolute darkness. There was a yell of terror from the room, and, without a moment's hesitation,

I swung through the window and dropped down amongst the conspirators. They were to a man crowding to the door, and not one took any note of my entrance, so great was their confusion. I followed the rush of hurrying figures as they passed through the door into a passage in dim light from a fire that burned in a small grate. One end of this passage was full of smoke, against which the bright flashes of drawn swords were as darts of lightning. Beyond the smoke and below we could hear the clash of steel, cries of pain, and savage oaths, where men were fighting and dying hard. As I dashed down the passage, sword in hand, my only thought to reach the prisoner's room, one of the retreating figures turned and called out, "Quick, monseigneur! follow me—the secret stair!"

It was Lafin. In the confusion and *sémi-gloom* he had mistaken me for his chief. I made no answer, but, as I rushed forwards, struck him on the face with the hilt of my sword, and he rolled over like a log.

Now I was right in amongst the scared plotters, cheek by jowl with M. de Savoye's envoy, and I could have dropped him then and there, but that my whole heart was in Madame's room, and I knew that there were others who could and would deal with him.

As I elbowed my way through the press, vainly endeavouring to find the way to my dear's prison, we reached a landing from which a long stair led straight up, and here I heard the Marshal's voice, cracked with rage and fear.

"Lafin! de Gomeron! To me—here! here!"

"Ladies first, Marshal. I must look to my bride."

Then through the smoke I saw de Gomeron's tall figure mounting the stair, and I rushed forward to follow him.

It was at this juncture that a portion of our own party forced their way to the landing, and one of them, whose sword was broken, flung himself upon me, dagger in hand, shouting, "Death to traitors." I had just time to seize his wrist. He tripped sideways over something that lay very quiet at our feet, and, dragging me down, we rolled over and over, with the clash of blades over us. "It is I—fool—I, d'Auriac—let go," I shouted, as he tried to stab at me.

"Let go you," sputtered d'Aubusson's voice, and we loosed each other. I had no time for another word, and grasping my sword, which was hanging to my wrist by the knot, I sprang up, and the next moment was hot foot after de Gomeron.

I managed somehow to force my way through the crowd, but the stairway was half-full of men, and at the head of it stood the free-lance, with a red sword in his hand, and two or three huddled objects that lay in shapeless masses around him.

Someone, with a reckless indifference to his own life—it was, I afterwards found out, Pantin—held up a torch, and as the flare of it shot up the stairway de Gomeron threw back his head and laughed at us.

"Twenty to one—come, gentlemen—or must I come to you?" He took a couple of steps down the stairs, and the crowd, that had made as if it would rush him, wavered and fell back, bearing me, hoarse with shouting for way, with them to the landing.

For the moment, penned up and utterly unable to get forward, I was a mere spectator to what followed.

The free-lance took one more downward step, and

then a slight figure, with one arm in a sling, slid out from the press and flew at him.

It was d'Ayen, and I felt a sudden warming of the heart to the man who was going to his death.

"You—you traitor," he gasped, as, using his sword with his left hand, his sword ripped the free-lance's ruff.

"Stand back, old fool—stand back—or—there! Take it," and, with a sharp scream, d'Ayen fell backwards, the crowd splitting for a moment, so that he rolled to the foot of the stairs and came up at my feet. God rest his soul! He died at the last like a gallant man.

They were backing in confusion now, and above the din I could hear the mocking of de Gomeron.

"Come, gentlemen, do not delay, time presses."

One rush through at that time might have saved him, but he stood there playing with death. With an effort I pushed d'Ayen, who was still breathing, against the side of the wall, to let the poor wretch die in such comfort as could be, and, seeing my chance at last, made my way to the front.

De Gomeron was half-way down the stairs by this, and when our swords met he did not for the moment recognise me. But at the second pass he realised, and the torchlight showed him pale to the forehead.

"You!" he said between his teeth.

"Yes—I—from under the Seine," and I had run him through the throat but for our position, where the advantage was all his, and my reach too short. He had backed a step up as I spoke. Whether it was my sudden appearance or what, I know not, but from this mo-

ment his bravado left him, and he now fought doggedly and for dear life.

There was a hush behind me, and the light became brighter as more torches were brought, and I could now see the Camarguer white as a sheet, with two red spots on his cheeks.

"Do you like fighting a dead man, monsieur?" I asked as I parried a thrust in tierce.

He half groaned, and the red spot on his cheek grew bigger, but he made no answer, and step by step I forced him upwards.

He had been touched more than once, and there was a stain on his white satin doublet that was broadening each moment, whilst thrust and parry grew weaker, and something, I know not what, told me he was my man.

Messieurs, you who may read this, those at least of you who have stood sword in hand and face to face with a bitter foe, where the fight is to the last, will know that there are moments when it is as if God Himself nerves the arm and steels the wrist. And so it was then with me. I swear it that I forestalled each movement of the twinkling blade before me, that each artifice and trick the skilful swordsman who was fighting for his life employed was felt by something that guided my sword, now high, now low, and ever and again wet its point against the broad breast of the Camarguer.

So, too, with him—he was lost, and he knew it. But he was a brave man, if ever there was one, and he pulled himself together as we reached the upper landing for one last turn with the death that dogged him. So fierce was the attack he now made, that had he done so but a

moment before, when the advantage of position was his, I know not what had happened. But now it was different. He was my man. I was carried away by the fire within me, or else in pity I might have spared him; but there is no need to speak of this more. He thrust too high. I parried and returned, so that the cross hilt of my rapier struck dully over his heart, and he died where he fell.

But one word escaped him, some long-lost memory, some secret of that iron heart came up at the last.

"Denise!" he gasped, and was gone.

I stood over him for a moment, a drumming in my ears, and then I heard the ringing of cheers and the rush of feet. Then a half-dozen strong shoulders were at the door before me, and as it fell back with a crash I sprang in and took a tall, slim, white-robed figure in my arms, and kissed her dear face again and again.

One by one those in the room stepped out and left us together, and for once a brave heart gave way and she sobbed like a child on my shoulder.

I said nothing, but held her to me, and so we might have been for a half-hour, when I heard de Belin's voice at the broken door:

"D'Auriac! Come, man!—the King waits! And bring your prisoner!"

There was a laugh in his voice and a light on his face as he spoke, and my dear lifted her swimming eyes to my face, and I kissed her again, saying:

"Come—my prisoner!"

As we passed out I kept between Claude and the grim figure still lying stark on the landing, and held her to me so that she could not see. So, with Lisois before

us, we passed down the passage, filled now with men-at-arms, and halted before a room, the door of which was closed.

"We must wait here a moment," said de Belin; and merely to say something, I asked:

"I suppose we have the whole nest?"

"All who were not killed. Stay! One escaped—that rascal Ravailiac. I could have run him through, but did not care to soil my sword with such *canaille*, so his skin is safe."

"And Babette?"

He gave me an expressive look and muttered something about Montfauçon. Then the door was flung open and a stream of light poured forth. We entered, and saw the King standing surrounded by his friends, and a little on one side was the dejected group of conspirators.

The Marshal, now abject, mean, and cringing, was kneeling before Henry, who raised him as we entered, saying:

"Biron, and you, Tremouille, and you all who called yourselves my friends, and lay in wait to destroy me and destroy your country—I cannot forget that we were 'old comrades, and for old friendships' sake I have already told you that I forgive; and God give you all as clean a conscience as I have over the blood that has been spilt to-day."

He ran his eye over the group, and they stood before him abashed and ashamed, and yet overcome with joy at escape when death seemed so certain; and he, their leader, the man who hoped to see his head on a crown-piece, broke into unmanly sobbing, and was led away

vowing repentance—vows that he broke again, to find then that the mercy of the King was already strained to breaking-point.

As Lafin, with a white and bleeding face, led his master away, Henry's eye fell on me, and he beckoned me to advance. I did so, leading Claude by the hand.

"Chevalier," he said, "it is saying little when I say that it is through you that these misguided gentlemen have realised their wrong-doing. There is one recompense you would not let me make you for the wrongs you have suffered. There is, however, a reward for your services which perhaps you will accept from me. I see before me a Royal Ward who has defied her guardian—*Ventre St. Gris!* My beard is getting over grey to look after such dainties. I surrender my Ward to your care." As he said this he took Claude's hand and placed it in mine. "I see, madame," he added, "that this time you have no objections to the King's choice. There—quite right. Kiss her, man!"

It is all over at last—that golden summer that was so long, and yet seems but a day. It is ten years ago that those shining eyes, that never met mine but with the love-light in them, were closed for ever; and the gift that God gave me that did He take back.

I am old, and grey, and worn. My son, the Vicomte de Bidache, is in Paris with the Cardinal, whilst I wait at Auriac for the message that will call me to her. When she went, Bidache, where we lived, became unbearable to me, and I came back here to wait till I too am called—to wait and watch the uneasy sea, to hear the scream of the gulls, and feel the keen salt air.

I have come to the last of the fair white sheets of paper the *Curé* brought for me from Havre this autumn, and it grows strangely dark even for my eyes. I will write no more, but sit out on the terrace and wait for the sunset. Perhaps she may call me to-day.

"Jacques, my hat and cloak!"

THE END.

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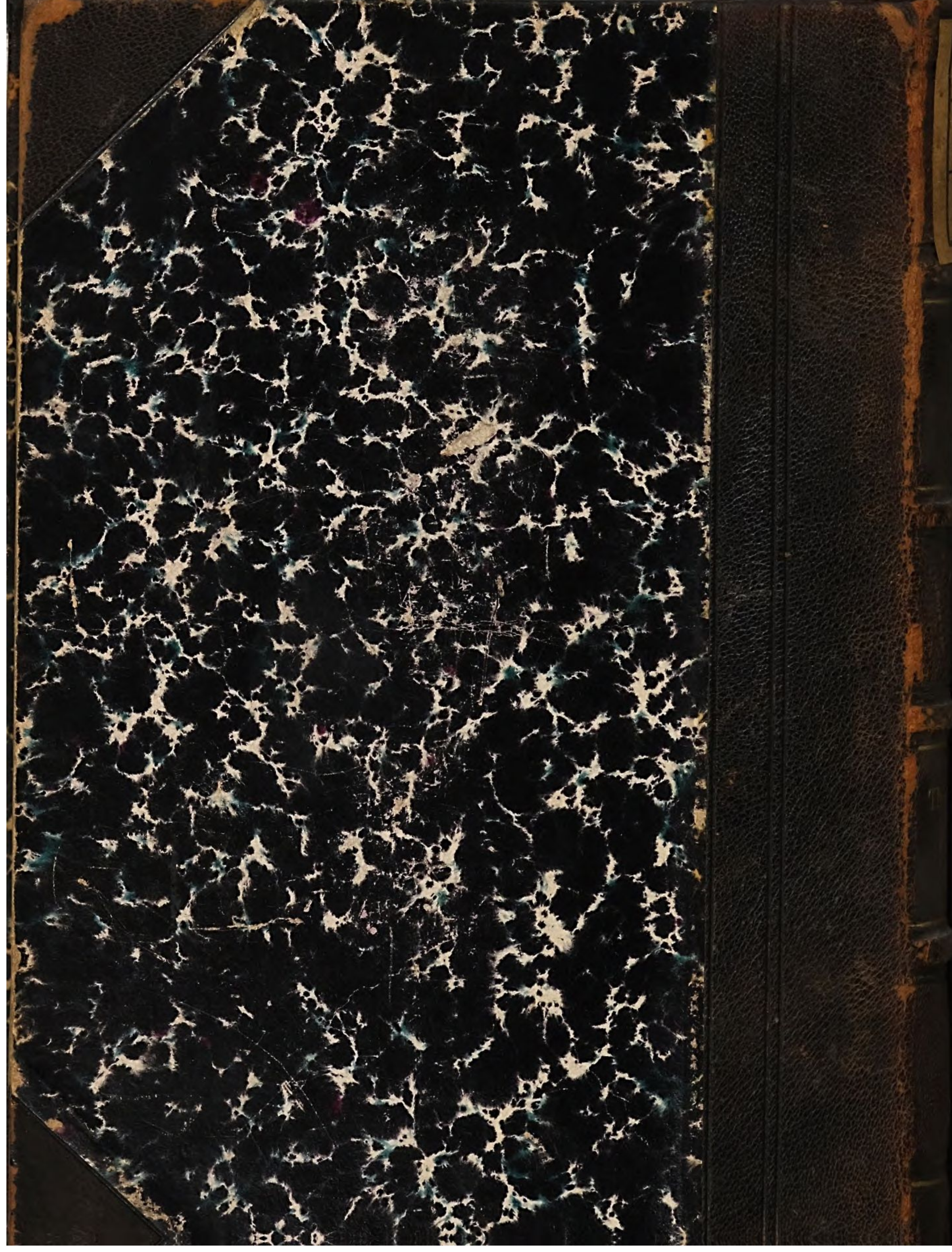
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